

**THEOLOGY AT SVST:
NARRATING THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF A
PASTORAL FORMATION FOR A JUST AND
COMPASSIONATE SOCIETY**

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The first part of this article is the narration of the birth and growth of a seminary and a theological school. Their joint identity as a Catholic institution is assured by the putting into operation the post-Vatican decrees and directives of the Sacred Congregation on Seminaries and other pertinent Vatican offices. Before a seminary or theological school searches and finds its own specific identity (most likely based on the charism of a religious group or community), that institution has to be compliant of and conformed to the Church's mandate on seminary formation and theological education. The second part of this article is about the culture and character of SVST blended in the soil of the Catholic social thought and the Vincentian charism. The fertile fusion of the two would give SVST its identity or DNA, as it were, metaphorically. Its specific identity is an add-on to the minimum features required of a curriculum of a theological school both from the government and the Church. How has SVST found its identity or character is based on the background and foreground of its "founding fathers," its on-going parenting for it to grow by relevant inputs and pertinent methods applied; thus, it is able to maintain itself and is allowed to grow consistently and creatively as a faithful heir of the Catholic social thought and Vincentian charism.

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the evolution of a new institution that emerged in lieu of some outdated programs and practices in

theological education that were no longer responsive to the new realities in Church and society. This is also the story of an institute's growth inspired by the new spirit brought about by post-Vatican *aggiornamento* and forged by post-conciliar directives and decrees for formation.

SVST's Rising from the Demise of Three Programs

Once there was a rice field, north of central Tandang Sora Avenue (Quezon City, Metro Manila) where carabaos and goats used to roam and where farmers did backbreaking work of plowing the field and preparing the marshy seedbed for rice plantation. From this same seedbed (*seminarium*, in Latin), arose another seedbed, a seminary consisting of residence (De Paul House) and a school (St. Vincent School of Theology) to nourish and fertilize those who have been called for the priesthood. What could have been just an ordinary and conventional seminary where seminarians would, in one and the same place, reside and study, is now a tandem of separate entities. This new structure or system is by itself a theological statement. Although the focus of this paper is the description of St. Vincent School of Theology as a Vincentian apostolate and ministry, yet it cannot be separated from the formative processes at the De Paul House. The birth of this set-up, in the year 1985, was made possible by the demise of three programs of the Vincentians in the Philippines: administration of diocesan seminaries in the country, the seminary formation of Filipino Vincentians abroad (Australia and the United States), and the Congregation's theology students studying at the University of Santo Tomas' Central Seminary.

How did SVST come to life by the "death" of those three programs? First, let us make a sweeping overview of the Vincentians, who were once called *Padres Paules* in this country during and after the Spanish period. The Vincentians were administering and teaching theology in the archdiocesan seminaries of Manila (1862-1953), Cebu (1867-1998), Iloilo (1869-1975), Naga, Camarines Sur (1865-1974), Vigan (1872-

1876).¹ It was at the behest of Queen Isabella II of Spain that the Vincentians would minister to the pastoral needs of the Daughters of Charity in these islands but with the accompanying intention of making the Spanish priests do formation work in those diocesan seminaries. The first Spanish Vincentians came to the Philippines in 1862 and the last Spanish Vincentian who chose to stay in this country died in 1994. But the Filipino Vincentians continued the work in those seminaries while the Spanish confreres stopped coming or did not come back after they had gone back home in Spain. But, eventually, the Vincentian administration of the seminaries with theology programs came to an end formally with the stepping down of the last Vincentian Rector at Cebu.²

The Spanish Vincentian province of Madrid took seriously the mission of administering seminaries in the Philippines. It was important that the Spanish confreres would have a good command of English, even if they were teaching theology then in Latin and Spanish. So, some were sent to England, others to Australia, and the rest studied in the United States. The Spanish confreres in this country also took seriously the ministry of forming Filipino Vincentian seminarians for the priesthood through studies abroad. Some were sent to Australia, others to the United States. The first Filipino Vincentians went to Australia in 1960 and the last one returned after ordination in 1968. The first to go to the U.S. was in 1960 and the last one who was ordained and returned home was in 1976. In short, that was the end of the program of seminary formation for the Filipino Vincentians abroad.

The last of the three programs was the theological education at the University of Santo Tomas Central Seminary, which began in 1971 and ended in 1984. The Vincentian

¹ In these institutions (where minor seminary and philosophy were also administered), theology for the ordained ministry was taught. At one time or another, the Vincentians handled other seminaries such as in Calbayog, San Pablo, Lipa, Bohol, Bacolod, and Sorsogon.

² The retirement of the last CM Rector (Fr. Manuel Ginete, CM) at Seminario Mayor de San Carlos (Cebu) formally ended the Congregation's administration of diocesan seminaries. Meanwhile, there were still Vincentians who were invited for lectures.

theology students commuted from their residence at Vincentian Hills Seminary (Angono, Rizal) to UST Central Seminary, Manila. The students found themselves in the company of theology students of other dioceses in the Philippines and those of other religious orders and congregations.

The end of those three programs reminds us of Jesus' saying that unless the wheat of grain falls into the ground and dies it will not produce more fruits (Jn 12:24). Also, close to our experience with the Tandang Sora farmers nearby, unless the grain of rice would fall into the seedbed and die there would be no rice to be harvested to feed the hungry. In the case of the three programs that died, there was a new life that emerged: St. Vincent School of Theology. What triggered the triple demise and what prompted the emergence of a theological school? We can blame it on the Second Vatican Council and the signs of the times!

Vatican II and Its Vision of Priestly Formation

The coming to existence of SVST would not be adequately explained without citing the new developments in the priestly ministry and priestly formation. There were two conciliar documents that respectively deal with them: *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 1965) for the ministry and *Optatam Totius* (Decree on Priestly Training, 1965) for the formation of seminarians for the ordained ministry. What new things did the Council say about the priestly ministry? *Presbyterorum Ordinis* made a simple exhortation: "They [priests] are to live as good shepherds that know their sheep (#3).³ *Presbyterorum Ordinis* expresses bias for the localization of the work of evangelization in this line: "In order that it might more effectively move men's minds, the word of God ought not to be explained in a general and abstract way, but rather by applying the lasting truth of the Gospel to the particular circumstances of life" (#4). If these exhortations are related to priestly formation, we can

³ By the way, later, Pope Francis echoed similar exhortation in a most quoted statement: "Be shepherds with the smell of sheep (*Evangelii Gaudium*: On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, 2013) #24.

easily take the cue of starting it in the very surroundings and circumstances where the formands would later work in as priests.

Optatam Totius echoes the “bias” of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* with regards the venue of formation. “In this way will the universal laws be adapted to the particular circumstances of the times and localities so that the priestly training will always be in tune with the pastoral needs of those regions in which the ministry is to be exercised” (#1). This obviously is another expression of the trend for inculturated and well-grounded formation that is pastorally relevant. In the age of inculturation and indigenization, priestly formation abroad for the local ministry in the Philippines would be ecclesiastically incorrect and, in the long run, generally expensive.⁴ This, in my mind, is one factor, among others, leading to the eventual demise of the Philippine province’s priestly-formation program abroad. The Philippine province had certainly seen too the “signs of the times” in local movements of nationalization and other upheaval-causing events that disfavored the study abroad program. To have continued this would be tantamount to insensitivity to the plights of the nation. In the same vein, for the religious community to continue administering a house of formation for the diocesan clergy would be to ignore the demands of new circumstances as well in the formation of shepherds in the field. Vatican II and some post-conciliar documents have always emphasized the need to expose the seminarians to the experience of the pastoral life. Yes, formation is still based on the confines of the seminary, but they need to have sufficient familiarity with the pastoral life that would be the area of their future ministry.

Post-conciliar Impetus in the Work of Formation

Paul VI assembled successive synod of Bishops, each dealing with priestly vocations in need of renewal in the post-conciliar church. Following up on those synodal

⁴ The population of Vincentian seminarians in college and theology had increased, then, that economically it was practical to have them study here at home.

statements on the priestly formation, Pope John Paul II (now a saint) issued his most quoted document on the priesthood, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (I Will Give You Shepherds: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 1992). This document attempts to ground the priesthood on more solid grounds of dogma like the Trinity, Christology, and Ecclesiology, but the pastoral dimension is never minimized; in fact, it is made to flow from those principal mysteries of the faith. The document has this to say on pastoral ministry: “This task demands priests who are deeply and fully immersed in the mystery of Christ and capable of embodying a new style of pastoral life, marked by a profound communion with the pope, the bishops, and other priests, and a fruitful cooperation with the lay faithful, always respecting and fostering the different roles, charisms and ministries present within the ecclesial community” (#18). Consequent to that description of pastoral ministry, the same exhortation endorses a formation that engages in “a pastoral activity that is relevant, credible and effective” (# 57-59).

It seems that a new system had been set for new way of seminary formation that would warrant more involvement of secular priests administering their own diocesan seminaries. There had been complaints then of diocesan seminarians under the CM priests about their being trained for some kind of religious life. They complained of rigid regular activities within the seminary, which would befit more the religious clergy than the diocesan one. In realization of this, in fact, seminaries run by the Vincentians in later periods enjoyed already the company of the diocesan priests in the formation of their fellow priests.⁵

Coming Home at SVST

Filipino Vincentians going abroad for philosophy and theology and, later at UST, Vincentians administering diocesan seminaries, all these programs died but had taken a

⁵ The establishment of Pontificio Collegio Filippino in Rome in 1961 has enabled many diocesan priests to get ecclesiastical degrees for teaching theology. Our course, there has been higher ecclesiastical degrees in UST Ecclesiastical Faculty.

new life in SVST. Vincentian seminarians in theology study at this school and are joined by diocesan seminarians from various dioceses of the country. CM students reside at De Paul House, a stone-throw away from the school. In older times, the two entities (DPH and SVST) would have just been one seminary where seminarians would have all their physical and spiritual needs met in one place. Also, the seminary studies would have just been inclusive for those who would be studying for the priesthood and only for those who were interns. So, there would have been no extern seminarians nor lay students. The old set-up would have not fulfilled the spirit of Vatican II in responding to the signs of the times like a more pastoral and inclusive Church with more pastoral and inclusive programs in the formation of future workers in Church ministry.⁶

So both Vincentian and diocesan theology students have come to SVST and they have brought with them not only formands for the priesthood from other religious communities but also religious sisters and lay students.⁷ Since the SVST institution is originally and still mainly today for the formands for the ordained ministry, let me point out first what it has in its programs and policies which enable it to concretize the conciliar and postconciliar vision of the priestly formation especially contained in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV) and the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, 2016 (RFIS).

SVST Envisions Its Finished Products: Well-formed Pastoral Workers

⁶ The SVST program, mainly made for the ordained ministry spawned other programs precisely to accommodate those aspiring to be non-ordained pastoral workers. Such programs are Master of Arts in Theology/Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry, *Hapag-Layko* (*Handog na Pag-aaral sa mga Layko*), Introductory Theological Formation, Bachelor of Arts Major in Philosophy, and Philosophy for Theological Studies.

⁷ From here on, I would use the word “formand” to refer to all those who would be serving as pastoral workers which include not only seminarians for the ordained ministry but also religious Sisters and lay people.

Its vision is to be “an institute for the theological, pastoral and missiological formation of persons for effective service to the Church and society.” This statement tells us that SVST is not only for the ordained ministry even if most of its students are going towards that direction. *PDV* and *RFIS* envision pastoral workers (all SVST students, whether seminarians or lay or religious) to be configured with Christ. They are “mystically identified with Christ” (*RFIS*, 35) and assume “his mind” (see 1Cor 2:16). The more a person follows Christ the more he or she becomes fully human just as Christ is; after all Christ, in his full divinity, is the “ultimate human”. Here, to be perfectly human is to be as perfect as the Father is perfect (see Mt 5:48), as Christ exhorts us to be compassionate as the Father is compassionate (see, 6:36). Pastoral workers are expected to be people of compassion because that is what constitutes configuration with Christ. But since this perfection is grace, it is a divine gift and since it is a response to the gift, that perfection is also the fruit of the subject’s life of *ascesis*, e.g., self-discipline and regular life. SVST’s vision of a pastoral worker as configured to Christ would always be that of a perpetual disciple (exemplified by Christ’s eternal docility to the Father) and always a missionary (“He has nowhere to lay his head,” Mt 8:20b).

SVST envisions a pastoral worker that is directed by inner freedom in the Holy Spirit without an individualistic spirit, motivated by “a sense of ecclesial communion” and shaped by virtuous habits. Central to all these is what the pontiff calls “pastoral charity” which is about forming “the heart that it will internalize the sentiments and ways of acting of the Son, continuously finding itself consoled by the Holy Spirit” (*RFIS*, 41).

SVST and Its Ways of Formation

After Vatican II and beyond (including Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*) we can say that the seminary (either religious or diocesan) is intended to form shepherds. No priest or religious

today is exempted from the ministry of shepherding. This main paradigm of ministry (shepherding) provides the structures and the priorities among the components of formation. Chapter Five of *PDV* (#42-69) enumerates four areas of formation (human, intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral) that need to be balanced for a holistic formation. Bishop Jorge Patron Carlos Wong, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, has an insightful statement on that need and demand.

“The main objective of formation must be clear, precisely because the seminary does not intend to form only intellectuals [intellectualism], despite taking the intellectual preparation of the seminarians very seriously. It also does not intend to achieve a monastic type of formation [spiritualism], although it certainly grants a central place to prayer and the sacramental life. It does not intend to form good organizers [“pastoralism”], although it is concerned with offering seminarians the best preparation for pastoral activities. Lastly, it is not concerned with forming only ministers of cult [“liturgism”], although it offers seminarians the best possible liturgical formation.”⁸

SVST’s Program to Form Pastoral Workers

Though De Paul House and the corresponding houses of formation (for the externs) bear the tasks of the four pillars of formation (human, intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral),⁹ SVST, through its programs, shares in the tasks, mostly contained in the curriculum itself. The school participates in humanistic and social programs like soup kitchens, community immersions, etc. These too can be included in the pastoral area of formation but the students’ exposure to these social situations naturally evoke and harness compassion, a quality of human perfection. Important, as well, to the human formation is exposure to situations where the

⁸ Jorge Carlos Cardinal Patron Wong, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, Foundations of Priestly Formation. ...<http://www.clerus.va/content/clerus/en/notizie/new4.html>. What applies to the seminarians addressed by the Curia Prefect applies to other pastoral workers, clergy, religious, and lay.

⁹ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 43-59; *Ratio Fundamentalis*, 89.

students have to discern and make serious decisions. Sufficient opportunities for making choices in life as well as in school hone an interior freedom which is a hallmark of true maturity. Psychologists tell us that human maturity involves inner freedom and interiority.

Intellectual formation is naturally what is happening at SVST either in the heart of the school or in places of the students' venue of study and research. SVST offers all the areas of theology, fundamental, systematic, moral, and pastoral.¹⁰ This division of theological studies is inevitable where specialization is needed in higher education and research, yet SVST is reminded by Pope Francis' third criterion of "renewal of ecclesiastical studies for missionary outreach" (mentioned in *Veritatis Gaudium*)¹¹: "inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches carried out with wisdom and creativity in the light of Revelation" (4,c). Here is the recognition of "the vital intellectual principle of the unity in difference of knowledge and respect for its multiple, correlated and convergent expressions" (4c).

The curriculum developed measures up to the standard of contemporary trends in theology; while still being faithful to Scriptures and Tradition it is committed to "signs of the times." SVST is fortunate to have highly qualified teachers who obtained their theological degrees from theologically prestigious institutions. Important to the intellectual formation is the development of a critical mind that can reflect on given experiences and issues by a scholarly use of current biblical and theological methodologies. Intellectual activities at SVST are always grounded in reality and the needs of the public, especially of the marginalized.

Area OF SPIRITUAL Formation

In spiritual formation, the term "spirit" suggests a reference obviously to the realm of the spiritual. However, this

¹⁰ The curriculum contains Biblical Studies (18 units), Systematic Theology (18 units), Moral Theology (18 units) and the rest are in the areas of the Pastoral, Methodology, and special issues.

¹¹ Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, 2017.

should not be taken in the context of merely the “mystical” or the “religious”. Obviously, in this area there is here a description of the realm of the Spirit, and thus, God and, for the Christians, Jesus Christ. Again, we go back to the vision of the Church’s documents on the “finished product” of formation: a “pastoral worker,” configured or conformed to Christ. What does this mean? If Christ is obedient to His Father’s will, then the formand is expected to discern and follow God’s will, and that is to be spiritual. If Christ follows the Spirit in his ministry, then, the formands allow themselves to be led by the Spirit where It leads them in their journey in life, while, at the same time, continually opening their hearts to a closer union with God. As sort of a side note, the De Paul House believes in the usefulness of the traditional means of spiritual growth (besides the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation) such as common meditation, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, regular spiritual direction, and the seasonal liturgical devotions. All these are always planned and exercised with the cooperation of the formands themselves.

After having emphasized that relationship with God through Christ in the Spirit and within the ambience of the Church, a true spiritual growth in the formation period is never separated from relationship with others, ecclesial ministry, and institutional outreach. Spiritual growth does not occur in a vacuum and in inactivity. Following Christ entails obedience to his commandments since it is consequential to the love for him (“If you love me, you will keep my commandments” Jn:15). So the formands are not passive bystanders in their spiritual formation. Embedded in Catholic theology is the concept of sanctification, that is, growing and bearing fruit in our spiritual life, becoming more Christ-like under the leading of the Spirit.

The Area of Pastoral Formation

Optatam Totius and *Pastores Dabo Vobis* locate the pastoral formation at the end as a form of integration, so this paper keeps it that way. Pastoral formation, in those documents, is made as an integrating element within the formation which is geared towards “true shepherds of souls after the example. of our Lord Jesus

Christ, teacher, priest, and shepherd." (OT, 4) Practically, all other areas of formation converge towards what is said in *PDV* as "pastoral charity." *PDV* says: "The whole formation imparted to candidates for the priesthood aims at preparing them to enter into communion with the charity of Christ the Good Shepherd. Hence, their formation in its different aspects must have a fundamentally pastoral character" (*PDV*, #57). Again, this pastoral reminder easily applies to any pastoral worker.

Though this virtue of pastoral charity is envisioned for priests who as shepherds are united to the Christ, the Shepherd, who is also the Head of the Church, it already begins in the seminary formation and theological formation for that matter. If you attach "pastoral" to charity, then, it suggests a formation of future shepherds that would be energized to lead the flock to green pastures. They should know, too, where those green pastures can be found. The formands have lots of opportunities to find them. Part of the formation at SVST is the course on Sacraments, including how to dispense them with pastoral care for the shepherd has to bring comfort and healing to injured sheep of the flock. Future shepherds have to get used to the idea that caring for the flock is not just a task inside a safe and comfortable fold but they are to get out of it, sometimes, to seek out and retrieve the lost sheep. The ultimate in the formation of a future shepherd is to take cognizance of Jesus' description of the good shepherd who, when it is needed, has even to give his life for his flock. That will be an ultimate act of pastoral charity.

In Vincent's engagement in seminary work for the diocesan clergy, it was charity that originally inspired him to undertake this task. It was charity for the poor, though, that began it all, like the shepherd's concern for the wayward sheep in the gospel story. Let us hear from the saint himself as he told his confreres: "In the beginning, the Company was connected only with itself and the poor. At certain times it withdrew in private. At others it went out to teach the country people. God allowed that this was all that we seemed to be doing, but at the fullness of time, He called us to assist in the formation of good priests, in

providing good Pastors to parishes and teaching them what they should know and practice. Oh, what a lofty, sublime ministry.”¹² Fr Maloney, one-time Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission, discloses in his book that Vincent positioned the formation of the diocesan clergy equal to preaching in the missions. “So fundamental was the formation of the diocesan clergy in Vincent’s mind that he included it within the purpose of the Congregation when he published the Common Rules in 1658.”¹³

Vincent’s story of concern for the flock deprived of good pastors finds echo in *Ratio Fundamentalis*: “The pastoral care of the faithful demands that the priest have a solid formation and interior maturity” (RFIS, 41). The vision of a priest with an interior maturity is actually what integrates the human, spiritual, and pastoral formations respectively to the goal of pastoral charity. This virtue will be next to impossible if the priest is devoid of a psychological maturity which includes inner freedom; thus, there is a need for a solid human formation. The inner direction as expected by one who follows the leading of the Spirit and not the direction of the “world” and the “flesh” (in their worst sense) and human respect makes a spiritual person. This is taken care of in the process of spiritual formation. Thus, to be a genuine human being and to be a person of the Spirit in the midst of pastorals cares and concerns, in the “field hospital” of human miseries, is a given of pastoral charity.

In the formation of interior maturity and moral conscience, the *Ratio* is correct in stating that the first mentor and formator responsible is the individual himself or herself. No one else can respond to the calling of the Spirit and no one else can give an account for the mode of response. Mere compliance to external demands and merely checking on the checklist of what to do and what not to do may make the formand complacent but it does not develop that interior maturity. Inner and self-direction

¹² CCD:XII:74. Quoted by Fr. Robert Maloney, CM, *The Ministry of the Congregation of the Mission to Help Form the Diocesan Clergy, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. Madrid: Ceme & La Milagrosa Difusiones, 2022, 88-89.

¹³ Maloney, op. cit., 89.

without having to engage in individualism is very much needed for a discernment in one's calling. Of course, it has to be complemented and ratified later by the careful discernment of proper ecclesiastical authorities like the bishop and religious superior. In one's strong interiority can a formand remain stable and faithful when buffeted by the challenges and misfortunes of life.

New Spirit, New Structures

The option for a school of theology (which includes philosophy) separated from De Paul House (both of which could have constituted a seminary) was a response to the needs of the Church. The old seminary system could not have easily accommodated seminarians from other religious congregations and lay people studying theology. It made easier the attaching of the school of theology to a university (in this case, Adamson University), which grants the degrees and exacts standards worthy of a university status. It highly professionalizes the academic activities in the school. The new set-up reminds us of the old practice of attaching theological education to a university setting, giving those who are formed for the priesthood more opportunities for exposure and interaction with society.

The spiritual and pastoral dimensions demanded by *PDV* and *RFIS* are taken care of at the De Paul House for the residents there. Other students studying for the priesthood at SVST have their own spiritual and pastoral formation in their own respective houses of formation.¹⁴

SVST, in one of its tasks which is to form people for the ordained ministry, is tasked in a multiple mode. It is to create a culture of discipleship that leads to sufficient maturity in making a definitive decision for the priesthood. This can be reasonably attained at the stage of philosophical studies. To be a priest is to

¹⁴ There are some norms with regards house of formation. A simple residence cannot be considered a house of formation. See *Ratio Fundamentalis*. 188.

be configured to Christ “through a deepening of a priestly spirituality” and faithful adherence to the boundaries and limitations of the church. This is situated in the stage of theological studies. Synthesizing the stage of discipleship with the deepening of a spirituality that constitutes a configuration to Christ is situated in the pastoral stage where the formand is challenged by the people and circumstances outside of the house of formation. In this stage where one exercises diaconal duties in service of a local faith community, the formand has to muster all his learnings and experiences for a grace -bearing apostolate and ministry. Again, this challenge is similarly addressed to those others who are not for the ordained ministry but are formed too for pastoral work.

II. THEOLOGICAL FORMATION: ROOTED IN CHARITY, ORIENTED TO JUSTICE

SVST has been given birth in the lineage of the Second Vatican Council and nourished by the subsequent exhortations and directives of the Church on priestly and pastoral formation. But, SVST, as a Vatican II progeny has to grow and adapt to the new realities and respond to new needs in society. In short, as it grows, it has to find and even forge its own identity. It has begun to find its own identity in its rootedness in charity along.

Its Character Identity from its “Fathers”

The progenitors have a lot to contribute to the organism’s historical identity; SVST as a sort of organism is no exception. Here, I would like to give credit to the “early Fathers” of the institution: its physical father, Fr. Francisco Vargas, C.M., its academic father, Fr. Danilo Franklin Pilario, C.M., the maintenance big brother, Fr. Rolando Tuazon, C.M.¹⁵ These

¹⁵ This is not to neglect those other C.M. confreres who have greatly contributed like Fr. Manuel Ginete, Fr. Jimmy A. Belita, Fr. Dario Pacheco, Fr. John Era, Rex Fortes, Kenneth Centeno, and lay professors like Dr. Emil Ibera, Prof. Enrique Batangan. There are many others that are worth mentioning, but lack of space won’t allow us.

three and other Vincentian priests have given SVST its Vincentian character, because its handlers have been faithful to its founder's charism, expressed in its logo, *Evangelizare Pauperibus Misit Me* (He has sent me to preach the Good News to the poor. Lk 4:18). The activities of these three confreres mentioned above represent the Vincentian charism and delineate the Vincentian character of rootedness in charity and orientation to social justice.

The physical father, Fr.Vargas, was the community's Provincial Superior who put into concrete forms the vision of a Vincentian theological school. He has injected into it the experienced he had accumulated as a missionary priest in the rural areas and local parishes, and eventually a missionary *ad gentes* in a far-flung developing country, like Solomon Islands. He allowed himself to be guided by his axiomatic principle, "Sent To Do the Will of the Father" also, the title of a book he wrote in 1997. This sums up his missionary sense and his advocacy for a Church of the poor. Furthermore, Vincent's love for the poor and the Church's preferential option for them are values he has inputted in the building of SVST. His work with the clergy, both diocesan and religious, and with religious women through retreats and talks signifies his conviction that the Church's first care is about sanctification, even if the human development of those they minister to becomes integrated to it. That means that the exigencies of people's daily lives through livelihood inevitably beg too for inclusion within the educational system.

Fr. Pilario, in my opinion, can be regarded as the academic father of SVST. He has spent his theological career as a teacher, researcher, and curriculum builder. His accomplishments in SVST's behalf which include accreditation, affiliations, curriculum updating and his personal achievements as researcher, writer, and as a workshop resource person are just too numerous to mention. His membership in the international board of Concilium International has led him to actively participate in so many worldwide theological meetings. I will just mention here his main and distinctive contribution to the Vincentian character of the school. Before he was totally engaged in the academic activities of SVST, he was already a regular priest-minister in the Catholic community at the dumpsite area called Payatas. His

commitment to that community continues to this day even during his “political” activities that push him over to some perilous surroundings and situations. He has helped in the founding of Solidarity of Widows, an organization meant to assist widows whose bread-winning husbands perished during war against drugs (termed by the media as “extrajudicial killing”) of the past government administration. In his previous position as Dean of Theology, Fr. Pilario’s objective was to promote the cause of social justice by inputting prophetic elements in the institution’s curriculum and advance the school’s mission in whatever forums he was invited to. Fr. Pilario’s other similar activities represent the best of the Vincentian charism of rootedness in charity and orientation to justice. This spirit he always carries with him even in the highly charged atmosphere of the academe and the political scene. SVST has inherited this spirit and legacy.

Fr. Rolando Tuazon, C.M., as the current dean of SVST, is a faithful follower of this Vincentian legacy, described in the experiences of the two Vincentians narrated above. His contribution to the identity and character of the institution comes from his pastoral work even when he was still a seminarian in regency. Over the years, he balanced his work as pastor of the Santuario de San Vicente de Paul, Shrine for the Poor, and his position as professor in SVST of Moral Theology with a bias for social issues he had focused on in his university research work. His connection with the university found him active in Adamson University for Advocates in Social Ethics (Adu-CASE), an organization oriented to social justice. His action-filled parish ministry is well-known by his colleagues in the diocese especially in the vicariate. Significant too is his leadership as Executive Director of the Philippine Action for Community-Led Shelter Initiatives, Inc. (PACSII), an organization that “advocates for the housing rights of the urban poor.” Fr. Roland is also the National Director of the Ladies of Charity, traditional front-liners (together with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul) in giving assistance to the poor. What makes it a more significant is his inputting of these activities in his teaching ministry that includes exposing and

explaining the social thought of the Church in the teaching of the Catholic Social Teachings found in papal encyclicals.

SVST's research on and advocacy for social justice were set in motion by the dissertations of Fr. Danny and Fr. Roland, respectively. The former's doctoral research was mainly related to social justice, "Back to the Rough Grounds of Praxis: Exploring Theological Method with Pierre Bourdieu," (2005), Fr. Roland wrote a dissertation in the same vein, having to do with justice and liberation, "Narrative Ethics of Liberation: Exploring the Role and Interplay of Tradition, Story, and the 'Other' in Ethical Practice and Reflection," (2006). In both writings, the readers can come to understand and appreciate the Vincentian charism and the Catholic social thought. Fr. Roland and Fr. Danny have been teaching a course on the Social Teachings of the Church and are "notoriously" known for challenging their students' "haphazardly-crafted assumptions." They see to it, however, that no students would leave SVST without familiarizing themselves first with and hopefully be transformed by the papal encyclicals on, at least, issues of justice and peace.

The legacy of the above Vincentian trio and the others not mentioned here have spawned this delicate but fertile fusion of matters pertaining to pastoral and intellectual formation, not to mention its accompanying benefits for the human and spiritual formation. SVST's going out to get involved in the life of the marginalized has been inspired too by the Vincentian call for Systemic Change. The Vincentian Family in North America describes it as a kind of "change among those living in poverty" which "aims beyond providing food, clothing, shelter and alleviating immediate needs."¹⁶ Instead of just giving away dole-outs, systemic change "enables people to engage in the identification of the root causes of their poverty and to create strategies, including advocacy, to change those structures that keep them in poverty."¹⁷ To the needy in the area, the SVST

¹⁶ Retrieved December 12, 2022, from <http://vinformation.org/en/vincentian-formation-resources/systemic-change-resources/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

community has not stopped its practice of giving material assistance at some occasions and hot meals in a regular basis through the “soup kitchen” among the street people and those living under the bridges in the area. While being still involved in people’s struggle for basic survival, the academic community keeps on making research, advocacy on the root causes of poverty, and creative means of assisting the needy. After all, Vincent himself tells in his more popular sayings, “Love is inventive unto infinity,” and “what matters more is not what you give but how you give it.”

It is known in history that St. Vincent organized assistance to the needy by setting up organizations, like Ladies of Charity, Congregation of the Mission, and the Daughters of Charity. His intention was to make others help the poor not in some kind of random way nor out of sentimental outburst of charity but in a more sustainable way. The sustainability of the theological school is important for the stakeholders for you cannot afford to see what is good simply melt away. This is the reason why the school has institutionalized its existence and operation for sustainability. The adopting of educational methods and the setting up of effective structures that respond best to people today augur well for both its survival and flourishing.

Dialogue: Tool and Realization of the Catholic Social Thought

A fruit of SVST’s faithful heeding of the Church’s social teachings is its adoption of dialogue as a means of evangelization: dialogue with culture, dialogue with other religions, and dialogue with the poor.¹⁸ This dialogue is not only useful for evangelization but is also the very realization of true education in the social teachings of the Church.

To achieve the “common good” which is a highlight in Catholic social thought, the students need to encounter and dialogue with persons of different orientations and allegiances,

¹⁸ See “A Letter from the Participants to the Bishops of Asia,” *For All the Peoples of Asia, Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*. Edited by G.B.Rosales, DD and C.G.Arevalo, SJ. Quezon City: Claretian Publications (1992), 93-96.

including religions. Pope Francis offers a justification for it in his encyclical on the environment, which has also a religious dimension. “The ethical principles capable of being apprehended by reason can always reappear in different guise and find expression in a variety of languages, including religious language” (LS, 199). How can they find such similar expressions unless they come together, to compare notes, as it were. Only if the institution provides opportunities for social groups and their respective members to come together in an encounter of equals can the finding of the common good be made easier. With the concept of the common good arrived at together, it is easier to reach a common understanding of social justice, that can even enhance the Catholic social teachings.

We can hardly arrive at an enriched common understanding of the common good unless we actually engage in an encounter with those of different cultural outlooks. For example, only an encounter with the poor can theology students be sensitized to the plight of the poor and gain insights as well from those who have lived and experienced the manifesto of the beatitudes. That is why aside from classroom lectures, academic activities like symposia, given by experts from different disciplines like sociology and cultural anthropology are occasions and opportunities for fruitful encounters. The speaker’s opinions and those of the students can be equally challenged respectively. In the process of exposing, analyzing, and critiquing ideas and opinions from both sides, new insights on social justice are born. Since a likely higher level of discourse is employed at these symposia, an intellectually reliable synthesis that results in these encounters would result in equally reliable application of social justice. It is in view of this that SVST always readies a good line-up of symposium throughout the academic year.

Multiculturalism: Fruit of Encounter and Dialogue and Its Challenges

The Church has recognized “the phenomena of multiculturalism and an increasingly multi-religious society”.¹⁹ It has also recognized that phenomenon as “an enrichment” but also as a potential “source of further problems” (CETTM, 1). In countries which have long been evangelized, the faith has been marginalized and almost ceased to be a “point of reference” and “source of light” in the interpretation of existence. SVST agrees with this view but in response to that marginalization of faith, SVST rather brings that faith to the marginalized population (those who have been neglected by policy-makers situated in the center of power).²⁰ That faith-empowered sector from the margins can now participate in the making of their own history.

The sacred congregation has made clear that a Catholic institution is “*a place of integral education of the human person through a clear educational project of which Christ is the foundation; its ecclesial and cultural identity; its mission of education as a work of love; its service to society; the traits which should characterize the educating community*” (CETTM, 4). There is no doubt as to the identity of SVST as a Catholic and Christian institution even as it accepts students from other faiths, like the Aglipayans, Episcopalians, Apostolic Catholic Church. This is a realization indeed of the need for encounter and dialogue with other faiths. Let me add that SVST has also accepted theology students of other nationalities in Asia and students from all walks of life, like engineers, accountants, businessmen, etc. This is to concur with the multi-cultural and multi-religious landscape of society where dialogue, as stated in Pope Francis’ *Veritatis Gaudium*, “is not a mere tactical approach, but as an intrinsic requirement for experiencing in community the joy of the Truth and appreciating more fully its meaning and practical implications.”²¹ Furthermore, its Catholic identity is the

¹⁹ The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (for Seminaries and Educational Institutions). “Catholic Education in the Threshold of the Third Millennium, 1997,” hence, CETTM, 1.

²⁰ The motto of SVST is “Doing Theology from the Margins.”

²¹ In this “Apostolic Constitution on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties” (2017), this “second criterion for a renewal and revival of the contribution of ecclesiastical studies to a Church of missionary outreach” (4, a) is “closely linked to and flowing from the first, [which] is that of wide-ranging dialogue” (4, b).

reason for its being “a genuine instrument of the Church, a place of real and specific pastoral ministry” (CETTM, 11),²² even as it reaches out to all kinds of persons and institutions of other cultures and religious affiliations. However, SVST always sees to it that its pastoral program is within the organic structure of the local Church and so its students engage in pastoral work with local parish as base.

With its educational project inspired by the Gospel, the Catholic school is called to take up this challenge and respond to it in the conviction that “it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear” (CETTM, 10). Catholic SVST cannot be neutral in the name of academic freedom, that is why, its students have been traditionally getting involved in political activism.²³ Having said this, SVST has not renounced its role in critiquing any human institution including even the Church, since the Church too has a human dimension.

Still on the topic of multi-culturalism, the Sacred Congregation states: “From the nature of the Catholic school also stems one of the most significant elements of its educational project: the synthesis between culture and faith” (CETTM, 14). It needs not be said that SVST factor in, in the teaching of theology, indigenization and inculturation in both content and method. Accordingly, one of the highlights in the life at SVST is the Feast of Cultures, the showing off of various cultures both local and foreign. In the same vein is the linkage between the private and the public in the school of theology. On this issue, the Church document is clear.

“In this way the Catholic school's public role is clearly perceived. It has not come into being as a private initiative, but as an expression of the reality of the Church, having by its very

²² The pastoral ministry has been greatly aided by being an institute of a Catholic University, Adamson University, whose social outreach is inspired by its identity.

²³ “To claim neutrality for schools signifies in practice, more times than not, banning all reference to religion from the cultural and educational field, whereas a correct pedagogical approach ought to be open to the more decisive sphere of ultimate objectives, attending not only to “how,” but also to “why,” overcoming any misunderstanding as regards the claim to neutrality in education....” (CETTM, 10).

nature a public character. It fulfills a service of public usefulness and, although clearly and decidedly configured in the perspective of the Catholic faith, is not reserved to Catholics only, but is open to all those who appreciate and share its qualified educational project” (CETTM, 16).

This latest document on education also recommends a Catholic institution to have “a cordial and constructive dialogue with states and civil authorities” (CETTM, 17). “Mutual respect” and recognition of “common service to mankind” are deemed best to sustain collaboration between the two sectors. That is why it was considered important that SVST got an accreditation from a government-approved accrediting agency in Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities— Commission on Audit (PACUCOA). That act, in the process, allows the theological school to occupy “its place within the school system” and in the legislation of the country, presuming that in this country people’s rights to life and religious freedom are respected (CETTM,17).

CONCLUSION

We have just recounted the development of SVST from its birth in the *seminarium* of the farmers and the demise of previous formation programs, through those years of upheaval (EDSA Revolution, economic crisis, pandemic, lockdowns, etc.) from an almost inclusive formation institution for the ordained ministry to a formation powerhouse for pastoral workers whether clergy, religious, or lay. We have also narrated SVST’s growth and nurturance in the Vincentian charism of love for the poor and the marginalized, on one hand, and the promotion of peace, justice, and equality in the social teachings of the Church. They give SVST its character and identity.

With all the sophisticated programs academic, pastoral, spiritual, and human, and harnessing them with highly qualified faculty, ultimately, we still have to measure them all against the simple standard of the Gospel. **Have all the formands been with Jesus just as the formation and criterion of being an apostle was that he was with Jesus?**

Have they been conformed to Jesus who surrendered to the Father's will and obeyed the Spirit's promptings? Have the formands for pastoral work lived up to the demands of the gospel and thus, stood as witnesses to its prophetic role? Obviously, no highly prepared evaluation instrument can sufficiently quantify the formands' attainment in this area. Ultimately, it is the individual formand's discernment in his or her interior maturity, through the final discernment as well of the formators, the Spirit-guided decision of the local Ordinary or Superior, that the formand can be found worthy of the pastoral ministry. St. Vincent School of Theology is just too happy to see its students being weighed by the Gospel demands and not find wanting! The Vincentian heart is on fire in its 150 years in these islands! May it keeps us on beating at SVST for its mission is not yet over. Let us be reminded, however, by the timely words of St. Vincent de Paul, the community's founder: "Let us allow God to act; He brings things to completion when we least expect it."

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