



WELCOME TO THE FORMATORS

I want first of all to welcome everyone to the course. It is my hope that our time together will give us an opportunity to get to know each other better, to share our experience of working in formation, to deepen our hopes and to relieve some of our fears. That may sound too ambitious but I believe we can achieve all of that.

We are here to reflect on the ministry of formation. The Secretariat for Formation was established in response to a “cri de coeur” from the General Chapter 2012. The discussion during the chapter highlighted the importance of formation for the future of the Congregation. The chapter was keenly aware of the challenges of formation in general and the needs of formation for Passionist religious life in particular. Since taking up this post in 2014, I have met with formators and others in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Italy. I have witnessed a lot of commitment and hard work on the part of formators, and realize that the challenges they face are similar everywhere. These challenges are not peculiar to the Passionists.

Is there a solution to our problems or an answer to all our questions? If so, I haven’t found it yet. I don’t believe there is one correct formula for formation. There are no settled answers or solutions. But there is the accumulated wisdom and insight that comes from the trial and error, the mistakes and successes of so many of us over many years. I believe we will be greatly nourished during our time together by drawing on this accumulated wisdom. Formation is the Lord’s work and He can use us, not because we are so wonderful but because God sees something in us that pleases him. God works in us and through us to achieve his ends. My prayer is that our faith in God’s work will increase and our readiness to be co-opted by God will also increase.

During the next three weeks, there will be presentations almost every day. I hope you enjoy them and find them helpful. But you are not here to absorb passively other people’s ideas. You are here to participate, to share with others, to learn from and to help one another. Our main focus will be on your active participation with each other in groups and informally. The speakers and the talks will inform you, maybe even inspire you but will certainly provoke you. That will be a very good thing. But that’s just the beginning. You will then be asked for your contribution. It is from that we will harvest the fruit. It is my hope that as a result of our time together we will have a clearer view of the best way forward.

The Theme of the Course

The theme of our time together is “Rekindle the Fire Within You”. It is inspired by the verse from Luke’s Gospel, “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already burning” (12, 49). St. Paul of the Cross uses the same imagery, “If you were consumed with the fire I pray for, you would become all fire and you would spread that fire everywhere, so that it would ignite every place you pass.”
(L. 1, 241)

The theme resonates with the hope of Pope St. John XXIII when he prayed for a New Pentecost for the whole Church. The saintly Pope dreamed of a revitalized, apostolic, missionary, and servant Church. We too pray for a fresh outpouring of God’s Spirit and of His charismatic gifts on our little community so that we too may be revitalized in our apostolic and missionary life and



be true servants of God and His people. We fervently pray that our mission in the Church and the world will be ever more fruitful.

Fire is the symbol of the energizing Spirit who fills the hearts of all believers for the transformation of the world. My prayer and hope for this course is that it will help all of us to experience the fire of God's Spirit within our hearts, filling them with new energy and enthusiasm for our vocation and our ministry in formation.

Our Passionist Vocation

Because my responsibility is for formation in the Congregation, I am daily preoccupied with the questions, "What kind of Passionist does the Church and world need?" "What kind of formation is needed for our ministry in the world today?" The Congregation of the Passion is for the Church and for the world. We do not exist for ourselves. We are not self-justifying. Passionists are for the Church and the world. This is a very important perspective. We have to keep our eyes and hearts open, attentive to the world and the people of today. This is exactly what our founder Paul Daneo did. He saw the needs of people, and was compelled to reach out to them with the Passion of Jesus as a remedy for the ills of the time.

What is our vocation and what is the goal of formation? It is almost impossible to think about formation if we don't have an agreed understanding of who we are and what we are about. Here I offer you my summary of the "Passionist credo". Something like this informs our life, our mission and our approach to formation.

"You proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes again" (1 Cor. 11, 26). This is St. Paul's summary statement of the Christian mandate to preach Christ Crucified. Passionists proclaim the death of the Lord as the great revelation of God who humbled himself to come among us and to die for our salvation. This is the cause of our joy and the motive of our hope.

"We seek the unity of our lives and apostolate in the Passion of Christ" (Cons no. 5). The Passionist vocation is rooted in and flows from the revelation of God in Jesus Crucified. Paul Daneo (1694-1775) founded the Passionists in 1720. He gathered companions around the Cross to ponder its mystery and to make it known to the world. We share in that mission because we too believe that the suffering and death of Jesus on the Cross is the decisive event in human history. Here the infinite love and mercy of God are made manifest. We present the Cross to the world as the most profound and compelling revelation of the true God and of the truth about humanity.

The mission of the Passionist is to keep alive the memory of Jesus passion, his passion for the Father and his passion for poor and suffering people. Our dedication to Jesus in his passion gives us a new sensitivity to human suffering in all its forms. We too share the human experience of suffering as we bear the burden of our human imperfections and the, often painful, daily struggle with ourselves and with others. This helps us to be compassionate with others and to help them to find strength in the passion of Jesus.

Our mission is to keep alive the cause for which Jesus gave his life; to speak the truth as he did; to be committed to those who are treated cruelly and unjustly by society; to befriend the poor and the neglected.



By keeping the Cross of Christ before us always, we are drawn to it and inspired by the love we see there. It is that great love that moves us to reach out to our brothers and sisters in need and to bring them the Word and the Bread of life, Jesus Christ our Crucified Lord. This is the mission of every Passionist.

Formation for Passionist Life and Mission

As I said above, I have no new formula to offer but can share with you some reflections on my experience as a formator for more than 18 years in Europe, Africa and lately in Asia.

(i) Europe

When I first worked in formation, the big question that occupied us was: “what is formation for?” We wanted to know the purpose and goal of formation. We wanted to be clear about the kind of religious who would emerge at the end of the formation process. We also wanted to be clear about the kind of life he would be expected to lead - the kind of community life and the kind of ministry. If we could be clear about these we could then design the appropriate formation program.

At that time, 1980s and 90s, religious life was changing at such a pace that we were not able to give a full, fixed and final account of the desired end product. We knew that the new members joining us would need to have a capacity to cope with change and be able to adapt to different circumstances.

Shortly after this, the big question for formators changed. Now, instead of asking about where we were going, we began to ask, “Where are they coming from?” It had become obvious to us that the young people coming into the Congregation were no longer coming from a stable Catholic family and society. They were bringing with them not only high ideals and hopes but lots of history, pain and suffering, hang-ups, disappointments, fears, unresolved inner conflicts. Formation would have to address this whole inner world of conflicts, hopes and fears. We began to understand that this inner suffering was a real and hidden experience of the passion that was affecting every aspect of their lives – their ability to pray, to study and to relate to others.

We quickly realized the need to integrate into the formation program the insights coming from modern psychology and to emphasize the importance of personal accompaniment. Formation was no longer a matter of discipline or external conformity. It was no longer sufficient for a new member simply to be in the community with the other members and do what they were doing. Formation is no longer a process of osmosis by which the values and spirit of the community are spontaneously absorbed and assimilated. It became increasingly clear to us that a lot of time and struggle is needed for a person to make the transition from one way of life to the new way of life in the religious community. And this transition is not always successful.

It was also clear, that a healthy formation also had to be contextualized if it was to be real and effective. It had to be informed by the reality in society. There were new economic and social pressures, new priorities and values that were influencing all young people. We also saw that the formation of future religious and priests had to be oriented to and shaped by the real needs



of people and especially the needs of the poor and the suffering people we were called to serve. This was a time before there was a strong awareness of JPIC. It was never easy to include in the program a really formative and challenging pastoral experience and service of the poor (for postulants, novices and young professed). Pastoral work was recognized as an important dimension of formation but this was often little more than a token and was usually of a religious or pious nature, prayer groups, the Legion of Mary etc. It risked “clericalising” everyone too soon. We began to look for an approach to pastoral formation that required “dirty hands” and manual work. The emphasis was to be on service. This was harder to find. We tried many things and some proved very helpful such as working with the homeless on the streets or in soup-kitchens; helping in a drug rehabilitation clinic; visiting the elderly and the house bound; cooking and shopping for them. This was real and challenging service of others, with supervision and reflection, and it proved to be a very fruitful addition to formation because in many cases it enabled the students to discover and develop talents and skills that had been hidden or dormant. They also began to see that the passion isn’t only something pious and religious but a reality in people’s lives. The students (postulants and young professed) were being changed by these experiences. Now we could see that the students were being formed by the people they were helping.

From the beginning of my ministry, I was aware of two problematic areas for religious, young and old, namely, the use of alcohol and difficulties in interpersonal relationships. (I was tempted to say alcoholism and sex but that would be open to misunderstanding.) What I mean is that the young men were sometimes shocked and scandalized when they saw older religious who drank excessively. And the young men themselves were not always “skillful” in handling their emotional needs and their sexual desires. It is obvious that the use of alcohol (and nowadays we need to include “the internet”) and human relationships require a lot of patient attention to form good habits and a healthy attitude. And then there came the shocking revelations regarding the widespread sexual abuse of minors and others by religious and priests, some of whom were living in the community, that forced us to give priority to human sexuality in all its dimensions and manifestations. This is still a number one priority at every stage of formation for religious and priestly life.

In my early days, the meaning and relevance of religious orders was not in question. Religious life had a recognized place in the Church and was highly valued. The various religious communities represented the Church’s rich heritage of holiness and spirituality. Religious priests were often the people’s preferred confessors. The religious churches offered a great variety of devotions and spiritual exercises that nourished and entertained the faithful. The history of religious orders was full of saints and attractive heroes. They were engaged in admirable works of charity and great adventures on the foreign missions. At a time of large-scale Church affiliation and religious practice, the religious communities were thriving centres of religious faith and devotion. The great number of religious communities matched the huge numbers of believers and devotees. In many places, that “golden age” has passed. With the decline in practice, the need for the big number of religious communities is also reduced. This is no longer an age of large-scale religious adherence or practice. Religious communities still attract the faithful but in a very reduced manner.

Religious now have a new role and status in societies that are increasingly indifferent to the Church and to religion in general. There is need for a new way of being religious. It seems to me



that this will demand a much stronger and clearer witness to the primacy of Jesus and his message. We can no longer simply be providers of religious and devotional services. This kind of life would be both unnecessary and unsatisfying. Our focus and our source of energy will have to be somewhere else.

(ii) Africa and Asia

So far I have been talking about my experience as a formator in Ireland and North Europe in general. In Africa and Asia, the situation is much different but there are many of the same challenges. The big difference is that in these continents we meet the first generations of local vocations. Many of the religious missionaries, Passionists included, were devoted to the establishment of the local church and the local clergy. It was only in the 1970s and 80s that they began to recruit for their own congregations. This opening up to local vocations was received with a great enthusiasm by young people who rushed to join. Today there is a huge increase in the numbers of religious men and women in these once missionary countries. This has brought great vitality and creativity to the Congregation in these parts.

The challenges of forming large groups of postulants, novices and junior professed are daunting. It is not easy to give to each person the individual attention he needs. A formation team that shares the burden is a good practice as well as drawing on the expertise of others from outside the community. Formation is now in the hands of local religious and this means that they have a good understanding of the background and family situation of those coming to join us. One of the big challenges facing the whole Church is to overcome the temptation to clericalism and elitism associated with the higher social status of priests and religious. This affects everything from initial motivation to availability for ministry after ordination. It is something that needs particular careful attention during the period of initial formation.

For the most part, the way of life of the missionaries has been inherited and is being continued by the new local religious. They are engaged in running the parishes and mission stations bequeathed to them. They do not feel a strong need to adopt or import the traditional forms of apostolate once popular in Catholic Europe. Their ministry as priests is still much needed and appreciated in their countries. Many are trying to identify new ways of responding to the spiritual needs of the local Christians and of the poor. However, the perception of the Congregation and its mission is determined by the history of the Congregation in that place. To try to restructure the local Congregation along the lines of the traditional European model is unlikely to be either successful or fruitful. The particularities of the local church and of the local cultures will colour and shape how Passionists mediate the message of the Cross to their people.

An understandable anxiety about the distinct identity of Passionists is sometimes expressed. What makes us different from diocesan clergy and other religious? The Jesuits, Dominicans, Carmelites, Salesians all have a very strong and distinctive sense of identity and spirituality. What about us? Our young men need to have a positive sense of belonging to a religious family with its history, traditions and spirit. But concern about distinct identity is an ambiguous feature of today's world. We are living at a time when there is a great fragmentation into more and more smaller subcultures that are sustained by specialist websites, chat rooms etc. They are often antagonistic towards other groups and remain isolated and untouched by outside influence. This is threatening the more important unity and togetherness of Christians and of people generally.



It risks creating a proliferation of fundamentalisms. Instead, we need to cultivate a culture of encounter and collaboration with others and resist any temptation to remain closed in our own self-sufficient subculture. This includes an openness to other religions and an active engagement in different forms of inter-religious dialogue.

The peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America are naturally religious and have been welcomed the Gospel with devotion and enthusiasm. These continents are growing steadily in economic power and are undergoing rapid social change. They are taking an increasingly important role in shaping the future. For this reason, it will be vitally important for Christians to be able to inform and influence the kind of development and the shape of the future that is emerging. This means that preachers and teachers will have to be up to the task by being well prepared intellectually and culturally. By being well prepared in the theological and human sciences, they will bring a Gospel perspective to the economic, social and political developments of their countries. They will be able to think critically and to comment on these important issues in an informed and credible manner

The Challenges

Everywhere, it seems, we are faced with the challenge of being creatively faithful to our tradition. The emerging consensus is that religious will continue to be an essential part of the Church's new missionary thrust. They will bring to this the energy and imagination that derives from their charismatic origins and history.

For formators, the focus will be on creating the environment where each person will be drawn closer to Christ and grow in his relationship with Christ. This is primarily the work and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But it will also require the active involvement of the formator and the community. For the Passionist, formation is the gradual transformation of the person until he has "put on the mind of Christ" (Phil.2, 5) who willingly gave his life for his friends. Christ is the model, teacher and guide. As for the religious community, it is called to manifest the values of the kingdom, especially fraternal love, service and mercy in a world that is increasingly obsessed with money and material prosperity. The witness of authentic Christian community, especially if it is international and multi-cultural, will be an inspiration and a challenge to the growing nationalism and the ethnic and religious intolerance that is evident everywhere today.

What kind of Formation? Let me say what it is not. To be a Passionist today is not simply joining a community. It's not just becoming part of a tradition. Today the community and the tradition don't have the drawing power and the holding power they once had. I'm speaking not only of our community but of every community, institution and tradition. The source and motivation of Passionist life today has to be an encounter with Jesus, an encounter that changes my life and gives me the energy and enthusiasm to set out on a journey with Jesus. It is that encounter that will ignite the fire of enthusiasm in us.

The centre of our life and of formation is the encounter with Christ crucified. We put on Christ. We live with his life, love with his heart. In this, the call to a change of heart or conversion is central. Change your life! Repent, you need a new mind, a new heart, a new life. Christ offers you this new life.



In summary, I believe that formation in the future will have as its focus and priorities:

1. The personal relationship of each one with Christ, who “loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2, 20).
2. A strong sense of sharing in the mission of the Church to a world of poor and suffering people
3. Fraternal life that is a communion of persons, and that manifests the new values of the Kingdom of God
4. A capacity for healthy interpersonal relationships
5. Open to collaboration with others.