

LIFELONG LEARNING OR LIFELONG FRUSTRATION?

Theory and Practice

Lifelong learning (LL) is today a very familiar concept, in the sense that it is spoken of a great deal. Of course much more is said of it than is done to put it into practice and live it in fact.

And since this imbalance is linked, at least in part, to the imprecision with which the concept is defined, we will try to clarify the idea. Also because the risk in the end is not only conceptual, but it affects our life : that is, if our life is not lifelong learning it is lifelong frustration. There is no middle ground!

1- From Initial Formation to Ongoing Formation (Lifelong Learning)

To understand correctly the meaning of the LL it is necessary to start from a precise idea of formation as such.

1.1- "Have in you the same sentiments as Christ Jesus" (Phil 2,5)

What the Vita Consecrata (Synod 1994) document says seems to me very enlightening and enlightening: formation is a process of progressive assumption of the sentiments of Christ. There is a great innovation, in fact, in this expression: the classic traditional images of sequela, of imitation, of discipleship are not used, but another perspective, expressed with a very human term, too much so, according to some. It is referring to that whole of which the feelings are a part or a constitutive element, namely the sensibility. The feelings, in fact, are a part of the sensibility. And it is very significant that Paul invites the believers of the Church of Philippi to have in them the same sensibility/feelings as Jesus.

It is enough to reflect for a moment to grasp the novelty of the proposal and also its beauty: it is proposed not so much to do things, as in imitation of Christ, or to behave as he behaved, but to have his own kind of feelings, emotions, sensations, tastes, desires, dreams, attractions, elective criteria, passions, affections ... Because sensitivity means all of this, this precious inner world that we all possess, to which we often do not pay much attention, precisely because our training is oriented elsewhere - sometimes with some ambiguity - on conduct, on gestures, on external correctness, on immediately verifiable morality, on what's politically correct ... There are *Ratio Formationis* that do not dedicate a single word to this rich inner reality; there are those who think that basically feelings, emotions, desires ... are not so important, that what matters is what you do, and to do it you have to go against what you feel ... well, it's great merit, because you've done violence to yourself. There are those who believe that we have no responsibility for what we feel in our hearts or what we feel urged to do. The important thing -eventually, according to them- is not to do it if it is a transgression; there are still those who are convinced that no formation of our feelings is possible, since everyone has what he has received as a result of his birth and takes it with him.

Unfortunately, this psychological naivety has caused us to misdirect formation from its center, making us forget that we are all responsible for our sensibility, or that everyone has the kind sensibility that has built up slowly over a lifetime. We cannot dwell on the subject here, but at least we say that sensibility is that emotional orientation, but also includes the mental and decisional, impressed on our inner world by experience or previous choices, in different areas of life. There are various types of sensitivity: relational, intellectual, aesthetic, on the level of beliefs, how we pray, the vocational, penitential, moral, obediencial ... To the point that each of us already finds himself with a rich and complex inner world of feeling/sensibility that he has slowly formed and continues to form through every choice, small or large, public or private, distracted or attentive, explicit or implicit.

1.2 - The Father's action throughout life and through life

Hence there are two immediate consequences. The first: it is a matter of forming this sensibility, and not only the external gestures or visible conduct. A limited time may not be enough for the formative journey, it takes a lifetime right up to death with all the process that precedes it (limits, impotence, old age, loneliness ...). Everything becomes a formative moment if one has to get to the point of converting the heart and its desires, dreams and expectations. In short, the true novitiate is done at the end of life, not at the beginning. If it comes to getting to the heart, that is, if the training goes deep, it also needs to be extended to the full extent and duration of life. The idea of temporal extension is a consequence of the intensity of the formative process.

Second consequence: if it is a question of forming in us the feelings of the suffering Son, of the suffering Servant, of the innocent Lamb, then it is clear that there is only one "Father Master", who is the only one who knows the Son well, that is, God the Father! He alone can carry out this action in us. Here we have the idea of Lifelong Learning (LL), as the pedagogical-creative action of the Father who molds in us the heart of his Son by the power of the Holy Spirit, in every moment of our life.

Let's start from theology, from the essential concept. To clarify that LL is not simple updating, recycling, recovery of past training, periodic recall of spiritual or pastoral or psychological type, just to keep up the tone and not let go ... At least it is not essentially all of this. It is an action of the Father, therefore grace, and sure grace, which is given to us every day, because we can not even imagine how great is the Father's desire to rediscover in us the face of his Son; therefore it does not exist, it cannot be that there is even one instant of our existence that is empty of formative grace, in which the Father does not put into action something to form the child in us.

1.3- Docibilitas

If anything, what is important and decisive, on our part, is the interior attitude of attention and availability to this action, or more than docilitas, the docibilitas, which indicates this vigilance of the heart and the mind to catch every little

impulse. In simple words, docibilitas is the freedom of the believer who has learned to let himself be formed by life for life, or who has learned to learn from all the circumstances of life, from every situation, from every relationship, with any person, saint or sinner, in every age and existential season, in failure and in success, when everything goes well, when someone accuses and attacks, even slanders, in health and illness, in youth and in old age ..., because he knows that behind every circumstance or person or event of life is the hand of the Father who ... is dying of the desire to see in us the face of his Son.

It is with this docibilitas that we must awaken in every person in formation. Let's say that never has a seminary formed a priest or a novitiate formed a consecrated person, because it is life that forms (as a mediation of the formative action of the Father). Nevertheless, seminary and novitiate have a very important function: to form to docibilitas.

2- The two souls of Ongoing Formation/Lifelong Learning

From what we have said, LL seems to possess two souls, or two dimensions, both important, but one of which is particularly revealing of its nature and function. LL is extraordinary, if it is interpreted as particular interventions, as refresher courses, of study and reflection on topics of particular importance, three-days, weeks of meetings, pilgrimages, monthly retreats, spiritual exercises, semesters or sabbatical years ..., and anything else that can periodically serve to sustain and animate the spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, charismatic life of the people in question. Let's say that this is the traditional sense of LL. It has normally been interpreted in this way, and so we tend to interpret it and put it into practice in our institutions. But certainly it is not the only way to understand it and not even the most important. Also because you cannot call "permanent" something that is just extraordinary.

This is why we maintain that the real Ongoing Formation/Lifelong Learning (LL) is the ordinary one, the one that takes place every day and in every moment, exactly as it is in its nature (theological nature). If the Father at all times realizes this project then LL is an ordinary reality, is realized in ordinary situations and everyday, passes through the mediations of normal life, from the brothers in community to the people I serve in the ministry. It does not need exceptional contexts, but takes place where one lives one's everyday life. Of course you can also avail of extraordinary circumstances, such as those listed above, but here is his heart of it. It is daily living that manifests its effectiveness and gives life to that new being that grows according to the sensitivity of the Son.

2.1- Ordinary LL and Extraordinary LL

Here is a possible picture showing the differences between extraordinary and ordinary LL.

ORDINARY LL

Responsible agent The individual

EXTRAORDINARY LL

The institution

| | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| Time reference | Daily | Occasional |
| Spiritual | Essential | Functional-operative |
| Educational | Totality of the person | Sectoral competences |
| Attitude | Docibilitas | Docilitas |
| Formative Content | The Word of the Day | Inputs and stimuli |
| Human mediation | Every relationship | Some relationships |
| Place | Community and ministry | Some unusual places |

2.2- Relationship between the two types

Both types of training are important and necessary, even if it is the ordinary LL that expresses the essence of the concept. Usually those who have entered the logic of the ordinary LL, and have a mentality and sensitivity formed in this sense, have no difficulty in taking part in the initiatives of the extraordinary FP. On the contrary, he sees them not only as an important and complementary completion, but as an indispensable dimension that best underlines the quality of the bond that binds him to his own institution and community of belonging. He will participate in it, recognizing its importance and giving the full contribution of his conviction and creativity.

And if there were those who are so caught up in their individual LL not to feel the need for initiatives for all to the point of not participating, he neither understood much of the FP, nor learned the docibilitas, especially the relational one. In the same way, but changing the starting point, those who participate in the various programs of extraordinary LL are not told that they are people who live the formation every day life. We have many people, within our institutions, who have no problem in attending meetings and assemblies, retreats and even exercises, moments of spirituality and fraternal sharing, collective pilgrimages (and ... great eaten), and then they return to life as usual without taking anything with them, as if all those meetings were a temporary landing or a more or less happy island, surrounded by the waters of mediocrity or of disinterest and substantial disengagement for their own journey of growth.

In other words, the transition from extraordinary to ordinary LL is not automatic at all. And this is important to remember because today, in fact, LL that you continue to preach and give is almost exclusively that extraordinary, made up of courses and conferences, times of updates and recycling.

So if we do extraordinary LL, we take advantage of these encounters (including, obviously, the Spiritual Exercises) to create and favor more and more a correct mentality about the sense of LL that is above all ordinary, its theological meaning, its intensity-depth. Naturally it needs to extend training throughout

life. My proposal, in a time like ours, still poor in the authentic culture of LL, is to take advantage of the extraordinary LL (courses, meetings etc) in this sense, just to create a new culture of ordinary LL.

The extraordinary LL should not give the message that it fulfills or exhausts all the needs for training etc, and to make it clear immediately that the real LL is that intended in the ordinary sense. In any case, it should always be attentive to this continuous reference, because nobody thinks they can delegate their formation to the institution and each one is encouraged to discover and rediscover the richness and formative value of the ministry for the community, the mission for the prayer, with all that this integral vision implies from the point of view of the vigilance and the internal flexibility and openness of the individual.

At the same time the ordinary LL must also remain open to the other way of understanding LL, which, precisely because it proposes initiatives that involve the group, prevents the individuals from thinking about their own training as a purely private matter and managed according to completely subjective criteria. Lifelong Learning, in fact, is both self-formation and training received from others and thanks to interpersonal relationship.

3- Itineraries and proposals

Now let's move on to the most practical part, to see what can be done on the extraordinary and then ordinary FP, but always starting from the idea that what is most important is not the identification of pedagogical modalities, but the creation in the person of 'an intelligent willingness to let oneself be formed by life for a lifetime, or docibilitas.

3.1- The Extraordinary Lifelong Learning

Recall that the extraordinary LL is the responsibility of the institution: it is responsible for organizing extraordinary LL programs, perhaps through an ad hoc commission, as we will say below, and in any case with the involvement of the institution in the person of its superiors (concretely, the superiors participate actively in these meetings, do not snub them by not giving good example ...).

a) Initiatives

There are certainly many ways and proposals at the local and general level, of considerable value, to which we have made quick reference before and that we all know well: from the spiritual exercises to the training events spread throughout the year, around a theme to be treated from year to year, from extraordinary community experiences such as pilgrimages (possibly organized in harmony with the theme of the year) or meetings on the spiritual life in particular environments (monasteries, hermitages ...), from monthly retreats to community meetings, sharing, the narration of one's spiritual journey, from spiritual direction to spiritual friendship with a confrere who is also a friend.

In this regard, the need to go beyond the purely didactic module, at the classical expert's conference, and increasingly to foster the experience narrated by everyone, where one enriches the other and is enriched in turn, where the wealth of one becomes everyone's wealth. These meetings, with the spirit of communion and sharing that encourage, create a truly fraternal climate, thanks to which in moments of crisis one could experience the presence-proximity of some other, would not feel alone and without points of reference, could open up with someone and find support in his time of difficulty.

b) A structure?

Also in this line, says a text prepared by the CEI for the LL of priests, but that applies also to the life of the consecrated, "we feel the need to be able to make available - at the diocesan or interdiocesan level - a stable and light structure : a place, which visibly expresses the care that a Church dedicates to its priests. Even more we reaffirm the commitment to dedicate a person or, better, a team, which can be trusted by priests and has a positive attitude not only to teaching, but also to relationships and is available to the apostolate of listening."

Specifically, this team should take charge of everything that refers to the province's LL: annual planning, organization of meetings, management of dynamics ... But not only that, this small group (and it will be fundamental - we repeat - that generates general trust) could be point of reference for the critical situations, either to give direct help (if explicitly requested) or to refer to experts and otherwise competent people who can help those in need. What is important is that no one feels alone or should be ashamed because he is facing a difficult moment, and instead has the feeling of being in a context in which there are those who can take care of him. How many crises in our religious families would have had a different outcome if a similar structure had been in place! Moreover, today there are more and more frequent proposals about periods of renewal/rest/restoration, even relatively long, such as quarters or semesters or even sabbatical years. In this way, a real LL program is offered in some institutions, offered to virtually everyone at different times. The same document just cited invites us to overcome "a" hit and run "mentality, which overwhelms anyone who forgets that the time reserved for formation is an essential space for qualifying the mission".

3.2- For the Ordinary Lifelong Learning

What we have seen so far refers essentially to resources and experiences concerning some particular moments of our life. But if we really want to enter into the full logic of real LL, we cannot be content with some moments and spaces, but we must identify the formative value of every day of our life, indeed of every moment of it. Otherwise nothing has changed, and even all this talk about LL will have no real effect. And we also specify that, as the extraordinary LL is the responsibility of the institution, so the ordinary FP is the responsibility of the individual, who cannot delegate his personal growth to the institution. It's up to him to take charge of it.

a) The ways of daily life

The paths of LL are actually already set in good part by everyday life for those who have a watchful eye and an attentive heart (life speaks if there is a heart that listens). Suffice it to consider a certain structure of the day handed down to us by a wisdom that has formed over time and which has formed innumerable friends and saints of God. Think of the meaning of the *lectio matutina*, which opens every day with the Word of the day (it is the good morning of God), Word as light and food, as the ever new theophany in which God, the Living One, today reveals himself to me (for this is *lectio divina*), the inspired Word (it is the breath of God, who somehow breathes in it), the Word that embraces the whole day, as a mission or salvation that must be accomplished on that precise day, giving it rhythm and unity (*lectio continua*), the Word that opens and closes the day (*lectio vespertina o nocturna*), in the peace of those who saw salvation.

Or think of the rhythm of time experienced every day in the alternation between concentrated time in contemplation-celebration of the mystery (time of prayer), then as time spent (or narrative), which is the time of our daily activities, in which the same mystery it is announced, as it relaxes (giving us also that rest which is the fruit of coherence), a mystery that becomes ever more comprehensible, and we tell it in what we do, say, live, indicate and propose to others ... and finally as time accomplished, as a time in which - thanks to this harmony between concentrated time and relaxed time - the formation of the person journeying towards the Kingdom takes place every day of his life. Such vigilant and intelligent attention could and should become like a *regula vitae*, something that increasingly structures one's daily existence.

Or we think, extending the time frame of reference but always with a relapse in the everyday, the liturgical year, conceived as a mystagogical process, along which the believer lets himself be formed by the seasons of the liturgical year as expressions of the mystery of the person of the obedient Son, of the suffering Servant, of the innocent Lamb, so that the years of biological life may increasingly be lived as a time of progressive formation according to the identity of Jesus (and birthdays "really do" the stages of this continuous assimilation). I cannot dwell on this. I can only reiterate the basic condition that allows the individual to live in a situation of constant educational availability, beyond what we have already said.

b) The community as a place and formative subject

The concept of LL gives great importance to the role of the community, recognizing in it the normal place of the formative journey, where each member is reached by the grace of the Father who forms us through privileged mediation, that of brothers not chosen by me and who have not chosen me, and who live with me. Each of them is the way along which the Father comes to me and I come to the Father. We note well: each of my brothers (who become brothers only when I recognize this mediating function in them), not just some of them (or the best and saints). This implies, on the part of the individual, an assumption of

responsibility towards each of them and creates a strong bond: everyone is responsible for the path of holiness of the other.

In practice, the community in which the so-called instruments of integration of the good are put into practice: spiritual sharing, reflection on the Word, community discernment, community project, ministry of fraternal promotion (in its various forms). But also instruments of integration of evil: forgiveness, reconciliation, fraternal correction, revision of life ...

A community superior should above all be the one who makes these instruments work, animates the community so that everyone lives to the end and assumes his own responsibility towards the other and lets himself be formed.

c) Docibilitas as sensitivity, sensitivity as discernment

We have already spoken of docibilitas, and we mentioned at the beginning the meaning of Christian formation as a process of progressive assimilation of the sentiments, or of the sensibility of Christ. The Son who in all things seeks the will of the Father and whose greatest joy is in accomplishing this will.

It seems to me that the element that connects the two realities is a very current concept, which often returns in the catecheses of Pope Francis, and at the center of the journey of preparation for the Synod now going on: discernment.

It could be the key word or the most eloquent symbol of the "docile" believer, and that has matured the sensibility of who in every case and in everything searches for God and his presence to let himself be educated. In fact, the one who discerns is above all a pilgrim with a sense of mystery, who knows that God is the Present and that there is no space or instant of him empty of Him; he knows Him as the Living One and then he searches for him everywhere and anyway ("Lord where are you ..., what are you giving or asking ..., where are you taking me ..., how are you forming through this injustice or slander ..., what do you want me to live with? this trial or difficulty ...? "), developing in himself a spiritual sensitivity that is attentive "to the gentle breeze". It is the believer as ob-audiens, with the hand to the ear to hear the one who speaks without voice, and to scrutinize in every reality his voice, even when it is feeble (obediential sensitivity). She is the prayerful one who has learned to turn to the Father with the heart of the Son and to feel how those words that the Father says of the Son are addressed to him: "This is my son, the chosen one" (praying sensitivity). But it is also the man who lives for the other, and the relationship with others, with the brothers of his community, as the normal mediation, as already said, even if mysterious, of the formative action of the Father, his privileged place (sensitivity relational). It is the lover who seeks the beloved, and if it is a question of love, it is also the adult in the faith who seeks with his heart, and is not content with avoiding the illicit, but wants to discover what is good and pleasing to the Beloved and that God Himself awaits Him right from this very moment, as well as what is good for the group.

But he is an adult in faith above all because he runs the riskiest risk (seeking God!), And assumes the responsibility of choosing and deciding himself in

everything that is right to do, without always waiting for orders from above (without making abuse of authority, from below), or simply trusting his impulse, but seeking, through the constant exercise of discernment, to acquire ever more a sensitive conscience to what is beautiful and good, true and just: a conscience in which the echo of the voice of the Eternal resounds, from which to be called and to allow oneself to be shaped.

And perhaps this is the most important point to underline. Discernment comes from afar, implies a meticulous training path that is attentive to one's own interior world (made of senses, emotions, feelings, affections, tastes, criteria of choice and judgment ...); it only makes sense if it becomes more and more the habitual way of living and believing, or the normal way of believing and growing in the faith of the normal believer. Discernment is unlikely if improvised, it cannot be what one does only in critical situations; it would be like reducing LL only to extraordinary interventions. And it is always necessary to discern why in every moment of life God has something to say to me and to give to me, to ask and to reproach me, in an often unprecedented and unexpected way.

And if it comes from afar the discernment of the *vir ob-audiens* leads also far, to conceive and live life as that long, never finished journey that identifies with the heart of the obedient Son, of the suffering Servant, of the innocent Lamb.

Discernment as a personal and community itinerary of ordinary Lifelong Learning!

I believe this is the real challenge and also the grace. Grace because the constant action of the Father who wants to form in everyone the heart of his Son is a sure gift; challenge because this is the true commitment of man and believer: to seize this action at any moment to decide to answer in freedom and responsibility. It is precisely this kind of commitment that the pastoral action of the Church must aim, so that it may be more and more what it is called to be, the body of Christ!

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Summary

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