

THE FORMATOR TODAY

As we approach the Jubilee to celebrate three hundred years of Passionist life, we take the opportunity to highlight the important ministry of formation in the Congregation today. As part of the Jubilee celebrations, there will be a special course for all our formators in Rome in November 2020. We ask the intercession of St. Paul of the Cross for our formators and those entrusted to their care. St. Paul was a kindly father to his brethren and is a great model for formators. He offers this advice to formators and to all of us, "See the good in others, always looking on them with great kindness as God does."

Formation Today

Formation for religious life and priesthood is one of the most important and challenging areas of our life today. When considering formation we are also considering the future of the Congregation, our mission in the Church and our readiness to serve God and his people. Fewer people are coming forward to offer themselves for the religious life and many of those who join leave the Congregation either during formation or shortly after final vows and ordination. This has given rise to serious questioning about the kind of formation that is needed in this new context. We need to address these issues in an open and realistic way. We also need to choose good men for the ministry of formation and to give them the best training and preparation possible.

The Formator

In these few reflections, I want to speak about being a formator in the Congregation of the Passion today. I will look at the role of the formator in a generic way, without offering a detailed consideration of the specifics of the stage of formation he is working in. It is clear that each stage of formation presents its own set of unique challenges to the formator. Here I will not enter into those specific details but rather confine myself to a profile of the formator in general that I believe is true for all the stages of initial formation.

The ministry of formation is both important and delicate. The Congregation needs good formators to welcome and accompany those who are sent to us by God. The formators are the ones who make the Congregation known, who embody its spirit and help newcomers to know and love their new home and family. This is not an easy ministry and it calls for great skill and care. The formator does not work alone but is helped by the active involvement of the members of the formation community as well as other skilled collaborators.

What is a formator?

The Constitutions of the Congregation (1984) give us a description of the formator (No. 81).

He is to be,

1. Spiritually and psychologically mature
2. Solidly grounded in sound doctrine
3. Suitably experienced in pastoral work
4. Well-versed in the spirituality and history of the congregation

The emphasis in the Constitutions seems to be on his readiness to impart information and sound doctrine. But the formator has an even more important role that depends much more on his humanity. By humanity, I mean his experience and skills as a human person who is growing humanly and spiritually just like those entrusted to his care.

What is the role of the formator?

The formator is not the principal agent of formation. This is always the Holy Spirit. After that, the young person is the principal subject who responds to the invitations and movements of the Spirit. The formator is a collaborator with both the Spirit and the young man. At times, he will have his ear attuned to the promptings of the Spirit urging the young person to trust, to be open, to respond. At other times, he will have a compassionate ear for the struggles, doubts and questions of those in his care.

It is by means of his own self-awareness that the formator is able to be sensitive and attentive to the needs of the young people he is working with. It is because he has faced himself and learned to cope with his own inner struggles and growth that he can help others. This is not a skill that is easily acquired. To help him in his ministry, it is important that the formator be given the opportunity for some training in the dynamics of human and spiritual development.

The most challenging and delicate part of the ministry of formator is to be a patient and discerning guide to those entrusted to his care. This is usually referred to as accompaniment. The first requirement of the formator is to have a realistic and healthy knowledge of himself, his personality style, and how he copes with the challenges of his religious life. This self-knowledge is the essential foundation of his ability to understand and help others.

The formator is also undergoing formation. He too is learning and growing all the time. He knows that he has to become more generous, more caring, and more self-forgetful as he conformed more and more to Christ. Like those in his care, he too benefits from the accompaniment and guidance of a spiritual director as well as some kind of formative supervision. It is because he is experiencing formation in his own life that he can be a helpful guide to others.

During the years of formation, the relationship between the formator and those entrusted to his care is of crucial importance. More attention needs to be given to the adequate training and preparation of formators.

Profile of the Formator

Many years ago when I was a young formator, I was told that the person entrusted with the formation of the young must have the courage and strength of a father, the tenderness of a mother; he must offer the encouragement of a brother, the support of a friend, the wisdom of a teacher and the discipline of a skilled trainer. He is not just one of these but he must have something of all of them. I think this is not a bad general description of the formator.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis offers us a portrait of today's evangelizer that I believe applies to the format who is also an evangelizer. The words the Pope uses most frequently when talking of such a person are tenderness, kindness and mercy.

The evangelizer is someone who has been captivated by the beauty and love of God revealed in Jesus. He has become a new person and is motivated to share this experience and vision of life with others. On the other hand, the evangelizer is not one who submits people to a torture chamber. He is not a harsh judge, not one who seeks to condemn. He is not a "sourpuss", like one returning from a funeral. He is not a pessimist and gloomy prophet of doom. Joy, goodness, beauty and love are his song.

The evangelizer is one who walks with the weak and wounded, with those who are on the way but not yet arrived. He is one who encourages, who offers a helping hand, is always ready to forgive like the Good Shepherd and the Prodigal father. His most important quality is patience.

This is a wonderful profile of today's formator. Through the influence and example of this kind of ministry, the formator will help young Passionists to grow in their vocation and to acquire these same qualities.

Information and formation

There is an objective dimension to formation that is acquiring knowledge and skills. It is a from learning or training that can be organized by means of courses, seminars, inputs etc. This is an indispensable part of all formation. The young people have to be given the essential information about the life and times of the founder, the history of the Congregation, the founding documents as well as the Constitutions.

As well as imparting information, the formator embodies the charism and spirit of the Congregation and helps the young to know, love and internalize these and make them their

own. He introduces them to the ministry of the Congregation and helps them to have a zeal to serve the people.

There is another dimension of formation that is not an imparting of information but the shaping of a human character. It is encouraging the transformation of the person until he is conformed to Christ crucified. This is the more important dimension of formation but it is largely the hidden work of the Spirit in the heart of the person. The formator helps the young person to be aware of this hidden work and to cooperate with the movements of the Spirit within him.

A Man of Faith

The work of the formator is a truly spiritual one. He is working in the name of the Lord and for the sake of God's people. He knows that "unless the Lord builds the house, in vain is his labor." He does not rely on his own efforts and skills but brings the young people in his charge before the Lord in prayer and places them in His hands and His care.

A Human Being

At the same time, being a formator is a role that requires that he be a man of deep humanity. He is a companion and guide to young people who are searching. He is mostly a listener. He is a trusted member of the community who embodies the charisma and missionary spirit of the congregation. He is at home with himself and knows and accepts his strengths and weaknesses.

He has the openness and flexibility to work with young people who are just coming to know the community. He is patient and tolerant of their questions, criticisms, dreams and idealism. He has some skills in understanding human personality and the dynamics of human growth. He is also able to recognize the signs of psychological stress and fragility.

Building community

The formator helps to integrate the new members into the community and to create a spirit of mutual acceptance and collaboration among the members. Because he knows each member of the formation community, he is able to create an environment where each one feels at home and is free to share openly with the other members. In his sharing with the young, he will model trust, openness and confidentiality. These are essential qualities in all relationships and facilitate a level of sharing in the community that is both challenging and enriching. In this way, the community becomes a privileged place of growth.

He will need to be strong in order to handle the inevitable misunderstandings, tensions and conflicts that are part of life in a formation community. The young people will be struggling as they grow in faith and self awareness. Sometimes they will be confused, angry, lonely. They

will not always have the insights and skills to deal constructively with their inner conflicts and may sometimes take out their frustrations on other members of the community or on the formator. This will need delicate handling by the formator who understands that it is part of the overall movement of personal discovery and growth.

The Formator as Mediator

The formator's role is also to be something of a mediator between the receiving community and the young person who is discerning. He represents the community who has entrusted him with this delicate ministry. He is, in a sense, the living embodiment of the charisma that the young searcher can see and believe in.

To fulfill his role as mediator, the formator also needs to be able to step into the shoes of the searcher to feel and understand his questions, fears, doubts and to bring the legitimate questions of the searcher to the attention of the community.

Those who enter the Congregation today bring with them all the strengths and weaknesses of modern society and family life. The formator needs to be aware of the world from which they are coming and the challenges this will entail. The surrounding society and culture have a strong formative influence. The formator will need an understanding and appreciation of the culture and be able to affirm its strengths and challenge its negative influence.

The role of the formator is difficult because he has to have the self-confidence and flexibility to hold together in himself often conflicting feelings, the views coming from the community and those of the newly arrived searcher. It will require a high level of self-knowledge and emotional maturity. Both the community and the young people will approach him with high expectations and conflicting demands. They will expect him to meet their needs and fulfill their expectations. He will not always be able to do this and so will disappoint one side or another or both, and face the anger and opposition of those who are disappointed. He will have to draw on his inner resources of self-esteem, self-confidence, professional skills and deep faith to deal maturely with these things.

Accompaniment

Accompaniment is the heart of formation. It is in the context of this formative relationship that the person experiences the movements of the Spirit urging him to be open, courageous and trusting.

To act as a helpful mediator in the process of moving from outside to inside the community, the formator will need the skills to invite and encourage the young person to open his heart and to share his feelings, his thoughts, hopes, doubts, and struggles. This openness and ability to share is the key to a fruitful formation process. In the atmosphere of open and trusting sharing and dialogue, the young person can become more sensitive to the movements of the Spirit in his life. He will learn to distinguish between those promptings and desires that are from the Holy Spirit, and those that come from himself and especially from his fears.

When a person moves from home to the community he will at first experience the loss of many familiar and dear things. This is part of the necessary asceticism of the choice of our life. To chose to be a Passionist is to chose not to be many other things. It means leaving behind a lifestyle, friends, habits, familiar and comforting places, people and things. This loss needs to be recognized and mourned if necessary. Along with the loss there is the joy of discovery as the searcher comes to know more about the Congregation and experiences a stronger attraction. He will meet new companions and form new friendships. He will gradually feel more at home and accepted into the new family.

It is very important that young people come to feel accepted and at home in the community. The absence of this has led some young people to leave the community even after final profession and ordination.

The formator will help the community to understand the young people, their hopes, dreams, needs, and difficulties. This is a learning process for the community too. The community wants to receive new life and energy from a new generation. This always requires adjustment and adaptation on the part of the community. This is never easy. The formator has a key role in helping the community to make the needed adjustments.

Preparation

It is essential that those asked to take on the challenging ministry of formation be given the opportunity to prepare by means of specialized courses in spirituality and the human sciences. There are many good courses for formators in different parts of the world and our formators should be facilitated to avail of them. However, the most important quality or skill the formator needs is to have a realistic knowledge and acceptance of himself. This means being aware of his gifts and strengths as well as of his limitations and weaknesses. The formator knows that he too is on the road of human and spiritual development. It is from this awareness of a common humanity and a shared spiritual journey that a wholesome and formative relationship between formator and “formandee” is possible.

I hope you find these few reflections helpful for your ministry. There is nothing new or revolutionary here. I have just offered a summary of what is merely common sense in

formation today. Of course there is much more that can be said. I hope the course for formators in November 2020 will address your needs, questions and concerns and help you to give yourself more generously to your very important ministry.