

PRESENTATION TO THE FORMATORS ON DISCERNMENT

OCTOBER 7, 2021

**“DISCERNMENT is a path of freedom
that brings to full fruit what is unique in each person”
(*Christus Vivit*, n. 295).**

Welcome

Why discernment?

A number of formators expressed a desire to explore the difficulties surrounding the evaluation of students/novices and their promotion from one stage to the next. The main challenge is the difficulty of making a decision about a person's future in the community, and the tendency to postpone hard decisions and so to pass the “problem” on to the next stage. Many formators have expressed frustrations around this issue.

We chose the topic of Discernment as the umbrella theme because it touches all aspects of decision making, and especially with regards to vocation and God's will for each person to be fully alive and to reach human and spiritual maturity.

It is our hope that the process of formation is experienced as a way of helping the person to arrive at the fullness of life that God desires for him. We are also convinced that if the person is not in the right place then he will be frustrated, suffer and maybe cause suffering to others. We have seen this happen.

We do not look at discernment as a particular action confined to times of decision. It is an attitude or stance to life that seeks to respond to the presence, action and prompting of God in prayer, in the people we meet and in the everyday events, situations and activities of life.

In this presentation we will use the method of “See, Judge and Act” familiar to many of you.



1. SEE

WHAT ARE WE LOOKING AT?

We want to look at some of the real concrete experiences of making choices. The whole of life is a series of choices and decisions. Formation is not an exception.

(A) DISCERNMENT IN THE SELECTION OF CANDIDATES

Someone chooses to apply for admission to the congregation and we use some method of discerning if this person is a suitable candidate. The person may know very little about the community and its mission and the community may know little or nothing of the candidate and his background. How can we decide?

This initial discernment is difficult because the applicant may live very far from the community, and it is not always easy for the vocation promoter to visit the family, local parish, school etc. in order to know the applicant better. We know from hard experience how important it is to know the applicant, his family and background before committing to him.

We have to use our natural abilities of mind and heart in arriving at decisions. Knowledge, common sense and the experience of life are essential but not sufficient. When it comes to a person's vocation in life it is necessary to turn to God in prayer in order to "discern" God's will for this person at this time and in this place.

(B) DISCERNMENT AS THE ABIDING ATMOSPHERE OF FORMATION

When the person has been accepted into the formal program of formation and begins his studies, it is easy for him to get so involved in study and the desire to achieve academically that the formative process of accompaniment and ongoing discernment can be sidelined. This is a challenge that needs to be faced head on.

Discernment in the sense of attunement to the workings of God in our lives is the heart of formation. **This is the atmosphere in which formation takes place at every stage. The formator and the candidate have to make time for ongoing discernment and growth in vocation at every stage of formation.**

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(C) DISCERNMENT IN THE KEY MOMENTS OF DECISION MAKING

When the time comes to progress from one stage to the next, a more formal process of discernment is needed. This is discernment leading to the practical decision about moving forward or not. This is a time for the person to reflect prayerfully and honestly on his life, his experience in the community, his desire to serve God and God's people etc. The community also needs to pray in order to see if there is a fit between what they know of the candidate and the life and mission of the congregation.

This is not a tribunal that sits in judgment. The entire process is done in a spirit of prayer and the desire to help the person to realize God's will for him.

The process should include the input of the candidate who is praying and reflecting on his life, the formators and the formation community who have come to know the candidate, his fellow students and peers, people from outside who know him through pastoral work etc.

It is important that an open and honest process leads to a clear decision.

2. JUDGE/ILLUMINATION

DISCERNMENT IN TODAY'S CHURCH

The importance of discernment has become a major theme in the pontificate of Pope Francis. He emphasizes discernment in every aspect of life and in particular during formation.

"We are free, with the freedom of Christ. Still, the Lord asks us to examine what is within us – our desires, anxieties, fears and questions – and what takes place all around us – "the signs of the times" – and thus to recognize the paths that lead to complete freedom. "Test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5:21)" (Gaudete et Exultate no. 168).

Discernment presupposes the person's life of prayer and closeness to God. It also presupposes a level of human and spiritual maturity that gives him the inner **freedom** to pray and to really mean "not my will but your will be done."

Another name for inner freedom is detachment and this is an important theme in Catholic spirituality. Detachment and abandonment to the Will of God are at the heart of discernment.

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“Even though it includes reason and prudence, discernment goes beyond them, for it seeks to be in tune with the unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us, which takes shape amid so many varied situations and limitations” (G et E).

DISCERNMENT AND THE FORMATOR

I want to suggest that developing the habit of discernment is a very fruitful way of being a formator. It implies being in tune with the Holy Spirit, or at least learning to be more open to and reliant on the guidance of the Spirit in prayer, personal reflection and a sensitive attention to what is happening around you.

To be a person of discernment is to renounce the need to be in control and so to be less anxious, less angry and disappointed with yourself and others. These are the feelings and attitudes that impede good communication and block growth in human and spiritual maturity. They also provoke similar feelings and responses in others.

To recognize the value of discernment is to learn to be open to the Spirit and to others who can help, advise, and make a contribution to your ministry. It is to know that I cannot do this work on my own, I cannot help the young men without the help of God and of others.

Through developing the habit of discernment I learn to walk together with others in this precious and delicate ministry of formation.

3. ACTION

We will look at just two practical applications of our reflections on discernment

(A) INITIAL PROCESS OF DISCERNMENT AND SELECTION OF CANDIDATES

Since the initial discernment is so decisive it is important to have a good process of selection. We have already mentioned how important but difficult it is to know the applicant and his background.

Formation is a very demanding ministry and costs a lot in terms of financial investment and the time, energy of the formation personnel. It is an injustice to both the candidate and the community to invite him into the program if he is clearly unsuitable.

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The Gift of Priestly Vocation (2017) no. 155 states that there should be a one year Propaedeutic experience for all candidates for the priesthood. We think religious congregations can benefit from this also. This is a year prior to the commencement of formal studies and it could serve very well as a time of intensive discernment before either the person or the congregation makes any firm decision about his vocation. Some provinces already operate a system similar to this.

Some helpful ways of ascertaining the suitability of the applicant can be used during the propaedeutic period. A psychological assessment administered by a trained psychologist is advisable.¹ This allows the character and personality of the candidate to be known better and it enables formation to be adapted more fittingly to the needs of the individual. Cultural realities and differences must be taken into account in applying such testing. It is important to stress that the formation process can help a person to grow but it does not usually change his basic psychological make-up.

(B) THE PROGRESSION OF THE CANDIDATE TO THE NEXT STAGE

We recall that discernment is a continuous process or habit that informs the whole of formation. The particular moments of evaluation and decision are approached in an atmosphere of prayer and in moments of silence. The candidate stands before God asking: “What do you want for me? How can I best serve you and my brothers and sisters?” In an attitude of inner freedom, he places his life in God’s hands and willingly accepts the guidance of his formator and others. The process will include the participation of other people - the formation community, peers, lay men and women, etc.

It is a time when prayer, reason, and common sense work together in charity and justice. The fundamental question to be pondered: Is there a fit between this person, - with his strengths, talents, abilities as well as his weaknesses and limitations – and the Congregation, its mission etc.? What is good for the person; what is good for the congregation?

SOME SPECIFIC AREAS OF LIFE TO LOOK AT:

Physical health and wellbeing; human and emotional maturity; faith and personal prayer; human relationships in the community and with people outside;

¹ *The Gift of Priestly Vocation*, nn. 147; 191-196

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participation in community activities; care for people; studies; knowledge and love of the congregation etc.

Discernment leads to decision.

It is important to be clear about who makes the decision in each situation.

Who decides that a person joins the formation process?

Who decides that the person is to proceed or not to the next stage of formation?

Who decides if the person is to be professed etc?

It is useful to have a dedicated period of preparation and intense discernment before entering novitiate, before final vows, and before ordination.

Summary and Conclusion

Discernment is a habitual attitude or stance towards life that seeks to respond to the presence, action and promptings of God's Spirit in prayer, in the people, events, situations we encounter every day.

In an environment of ongoing discernment, formation helps the person to arrive at the fullness of life that God desires for him either within the community or elsewhere.

These few reflections are intended to open a larger discussion among yourselves and to help you to refine the processes of discernment in your province.

APPENDIX

Some useful materials on discernment can be found in the following sources:

Pope Francis

Amoris Laetitia	Nos. 166-312
Gaudete et Exultate	Nos. 132-139; 166-177.
Christus Vivit	Chapter 9 – nos. 278 ff.

The Revised General Program of Passionist Formation (Draft)

Nos. 63-69	The initial discernment and selection of candidates
Nos. 70-86	The discussion of Stage One, The Pre-Novitiate