

SOME REFLECTIONS ON FORMATION TODAY

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As I take leave of my role as Secretary General for Formation, I offer these few remarks on what I see as the salient elements of formation that call for ongoing attention in every part of the Congregation today. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank all the formators for your hard work and commitment, and for your collaboration with me during my time in this role.

I am happy to tell you that the recent General Synod accepted the Revised General Plan of Formation as a guide and point of reference for the formation of Passionists throughout the world. I hope the formators of the congregation will work together to implement the plan and the values it expresses in the particular circumstances in which they find themselves.

✠ The Cultural Context from which candidates come

Humanly speaking, I think it is more difficult than ever to be a priest or religious in the Catholic Church today. It is more demanding in terms of the spiritual depth, the professional competence, and the relational capacities expected of candidates.

In the past, the majority of candidates for religious life and priesthood came from Catholic families, with a stable and similar family and social background. For the most part, they had a solid personality structure, good habits of prayer and ethical behavior. The main focus of seminary training was on strengthening spiritual values and practices already present, and imparting sound philosophical and theological intellectual formation. Today the situation is very different in every part of the world. Those seeking admission represent a more heterogeneous population, with diversity in family and religious backgrounds, personal gifts, levels of maturity and cultural experience.

Before admission to the seminary or religious community, common sense indicates that it is important to verify the human and spiritual qualities of the person and to evaluate the authenticity of his motivation.



The young person should also have the educational level required in his country for entrance to university. It is also recommended that he receive state-recognized qualifications.

It is important to recall that often it is the candidates preexisting beliefs or espoused values and embedded practices that create problems in formation. Very often they remain in place and continue after formation to define the kind of priest and religious he is. For this reason, it is very important to have a true knowledge of the candidate and his abilities before accepting him into the formation program.

✿ The Goal of Formation

It is our hope that the lifelong commitment to Christ as a religious will help the person to grow in holiness. However, the specific goal of formation is not to make one a saint (holiness). That is the goal of the Christian life in general. We hope that all our religious are in tune with the divine life within them and manifest it in their daily choices and actions. However, the specific goal of formation is more restricted and precise. It is specified by the goal of the religious community, and it is essentially missionary and oriented towards service. Its aim is to cultivate healthy and happy Passionist religious and missionaries. It presupposes and builds upon the human capacity for life in community with one's brothers as well as empathy with people who are suffering and in need.

The specific challenges of formation are captured by the following questions: How can one assist the person to be mature humanly, spiritually and morally so that he achieves the goal of being a servant and shepherd like Christ? How can the positive motivations be deepened and selfish motivations purified so that he is capable of unselfish relationships? How can one be helped to discern and resist potentially harmful or destructive behavior especially behavior that crosses physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual boundaries?

All of this is possible to the extent that the person is able to learn from experience and grow in self-knowledge and self-discipline. However, the ability to learn cannot be taken for granted.

Many of our religious are also priests. Priestly formation is clearly aimed at pastoral effectiveness. This includes pastoral charity and the capacity to minister ethically and with integrity. Priests are called to be servants and shepherds after the example of Christ. This applies to religious life in its own way.

✿ An Integral Formation

I quote the following without comment since it puts the matter clearly and succinctly.

“The concept of integral formation is of the greatest importance, since it is the whole person, with all that he is and all that he possesses, who will be at the Lord's service in the Christian community. The one called is an “integral subject”, namely someone who has been previously chosen to attain a sound interior life, without

divisions or contradictions. It is necessary to adopt an integrated pedagogical model in order to reach this objective: a journey that allows the formative community to cooperate with the action of the Holy Spirit, ensuring a proper balance between the different dimensions of formation” (*Ratio Formationis*, Rome 2017, no. 92).

Human Formation

Candidates are inspired by the life and mission of Jesus, and the high ideals of the religious community, and at the same time are also in the grip of competing desires and needs that prevent them from giving themselves freely to Christ.

Each one of us has to struggle with the many things within us and around us that prevent us from knowing our true identity as God’s beloved children. These include our human limitations and sinfulness, as well as our fears and self-doubt. There are many factors from our history and environment that hinder us from realizing our full potential and becoming what God invites us to be. The Christian life includes the gradual identification of these negative factors and slowly overcoming them and growing in inner freedom.

During the first phase of formation “special attention is given to the human dimension, in harmony with spiritual growth. . . For religious and priestly formation, the importance of human formation cannot be sufficiently emphasized. Indeed, the holiness of a priest is built upon it and depends, in large part, upon the authenticity and maturity of his humanity. The lack of a well-structured and balanced personality is a serious and objective hindrance to the continuation of formation for the priesthood” (RF 63).

The documents of the Church call for an integrated formation that includes the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions. This does not mean that now we must add extra courses on the topic of “human formation”. Courses and intellectual input is still at the level of “intellectual formation”. Human formation is not achieved by employing intellectual means alone. Of course it may be useful to include some information on the complex nature of the human person and the process of human growth. However, information and knowledge alone will not achieve the desired human formation. Something else is needed to reach and touch those deeper dimensions of the person’s inner life. The formation of the “heart” requires a different approach to the familiar formation of the “head”.

The formation of the heart is done primarily through a process of introspection leading to a growth in self-knowledge. Introspection here means reflecting upon one’s experiences, reactions and feelings in everyday situations. This is not the same as examination of conscience but rather growing in the capacity to notice one’s thoughts, feelings and reactions to people and events. The person can be helped to see to what extent his feelings, reactions and behavior are governed by his professed values or by some other stronger needs or desires. In this way, he begins to recognize regular patterns of reaction and behavior and eventually he

begins to understand the kind of person he is. He begins to see the tension between his ideals and the reality of his life.

The candidate cannot limit himself simply to demonstrating a “veneer of virtuous habits, a merely external life and formalistic obedience to abstract principles. Rather, he is called to act with great *inner freedom*” (RF 41).

Human formation is the foundation or cornerstone of all formation (PDV 43) and helps the person to live out his priestly and religious vocations as a mature adult. The abandonment of priestly and religious vocations frequently originates in crises around *human affectivity and sexuality*. This area needs a great deal of attention before and after the seminary years (Zollner).

“It is not unusual to see the character the candidate brings through the front door of a formation program to be, by and large, the very character that walks out the back door at the end of the process. Some fine-tuning may go on, but radical changes are rare. People generally stay in character. We generally dismiss atypical behavior or give it little attention because, since it is so uncharacteristic of the candidate, we feel that it does not represent their true self.” (Richard Gula)

We can often know what we ought to do, what is best for us spiritually, humanly, physically, without being able to do it, because in certain areas of our lives the willingness needed to change is lacking, and in these areas we are “effectively unfree”.

Being “a/effectively free” means being free enough interiorly to hear what God is saying to us and knowing what response is expected in a given situation. This capacity to listen effectively or to learn from experience is not something that comes from maturing years (chronological age), or from years spent studying (theology or philosophy or psychology), nor from merely proclaiming Gospel values. It has to do with the choices we make in the here and now in day-to-day life that bring about an inner harmony or disharmony between the persons we are and the persons we want to be. We strive to achieve a harmony between the values we proclaim and our daily choices.

Many resources are invested in intellectual formation. However, there is a great neglect in training and resourcing formation personnel. This is a serious neglect since vocational crises after ordination in almost all instances are not linked to academic and theological questions but almost exclusively to human, relational, emotional and sexual struggles.

Psychology

On the use of psychological tools see RF 191-196.

The humanistic approach that encounters others with “unconditional positive regard” is good as a starting point. It is necessary especially for those whose self-esteem and personality structures are not sufficiently developed. It is not enough for living out the full gospel way of loving service, because there is an inbuilt

tendency in human beings to remain at the level of emotional self-fulfillment and the desire for personal happiness.

People need to build up enough self-esteem and personality structure so that they can give themselves, and discover that so long as they are worried about gaining their own gratification or craving self-fulfillment through position, power, status, money or sex, they will never be satisfied or fulfilled.

☞ The important contribution of women to formation

“The presence of women in the seminary journey has its own formative significance. Their presence helps to instill a recognition of how men and women complement one another. Often, women are numerically greater among those whom the priest will serve, and with whom he will work in the pastoral ministry (RF 151).

Seminarians who make a promise of chaste celibacy and also promise to live in perfect continence for life, must have the possibility to interact with women as adult to adult and relate with them on an equal basis in an open, friendly and mature way from the very beginning of their formation. otherwise, they may find themselves in relational difficulties in later life, either created by inappropriate distance or inappropriate intimacy.

☞ The Formator

“The community of formators is made up of religious who are chosen for it and well-prepared, commissioned to work in the delicate mission of formation. It is important that there are formators assigned exclusively to this task, so they can dedicate themselves completely to it“ (RF 132).

“Each formator should be possessed of human, spiritual, pastoral and professional abilities and resources so as to provide the right kind of accompaniment that is balanced and respectful of the freedom and the conscience of the other person, and that will help him in his human and spiritual growth” (RF 49).

“In the process of formation it is necessary that the seminarian should know himself and let himself be known, relating to the formators with sincerity and transparency” (RF 45), in an indispensable spirit of ”mutual trust” (RF 47).

The repeated call for a more in-depth human preparation, particularly in the area of affective maturity, the handling of sexual and emotional areas of life, is an indication that this is not yet happening. It still needs to find its way into our formation programs. One reason it is not happening is that the formators are not trained and are not comfortable with these areas.

☞ Accompaniment

The new emphasis on one-to-one accompaniment as a means of enabling the person to gradually internalize the values he proclaims is maybe the key to an improved formation process. A person needs to know himself humanly, his strengths and his limitations, before he can legitimately give himself to God or to another person. We cannot offer to another what we do not possess.

Formation today is seen as a gradual process in which one learns slowly but surely that the balance between the high ideals and the lived experience of limitation and failure can be lived in a way that is balanced and that leads in the long run to authentic human and spiritual maturity. As one grows in conviction and self-knowledge one begins to experience greater inner freedom and is less dependent on external supports and structures.

If the individual avails himself of the one-to-one vocational accompaniment he will be helped to reflect on ongoing relationships and to notice what is happening within himself in various situations and with different people. If he can learn from the experience of reflective living, he will be better able to discern where God is leading him and respond with greater freedom.

A great challenge is help the candidate to acquire a sufficient level of openness of to talk about his real issues with regard to the need for affection, questions about closeness and distance with others inside and outside, emotional ups and downs, desires for sexual interaction, and not infrequently, sexual acting-out before and during seminary formation.

The whole of formation takes place in the new spirit of *Synodality* that emphasizes our walking together with others in the Church, attentive listening to the Spirit speaking through others, and learning to discern together the best ways forward. The formation community flourishes through its openness to the many others who can contribute by their prayer, experience, expertise, and Christian commitment.

I leave you with these reflections and wish you every blessing and happiness in your ministry.

Martin Coffey