



PROMOTING PERSEVERANCE IN THE CONSECRATED LIFE

**ANTHROPOLOGICAL CHALLENGES
TO FORMATION**

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**67° CONVENTUS SEMESTRALIS
UNIONE SUPERIORI GENERALI**

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TO FORMATION**

VOCATIONAL FIDELITY

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Our 67th Assembly will work on the second part of our reflection on "Vocational Fidelity" and, therefore, it is a continuation of the Assembly that we had in November 2005. At the end of the previous Assembly we sensed that many of you wanted to continue to discuss this theme starting from the perspective of theological anthropology, which would allow us to take an in-depth look at the bases that sustain religious life today, and it would help us to get to know young people better and to review our formation programs in order to respond better to the reality in which we live today.

Our discussions during the previous Assembly touched on many topics that caught our attention. Among the topics discussed were the themes on reasons for entering, reasons for remaining faithful at different life stages, discernment and the accompaniment of religious, consistency and unity of those in formation, the quality of spiritual life, current culture, the socio-cultural environment and initial formation, factors that facilitate the vitality of a religious Institute. Without trying to be exhaustive about factors that influence fidelity, it is important to take an in-depth look and try to discern the most relevant ones.

Father Bernardo Olivera, in an excellent presentation made to a General Chapter in October of last year, brought up very correctly the situation that is often repeated today in our own Institutes: *It would seem that the discovery of human love has become something unreal by the monastic searching for God. Obviously, now it is not about judging the vocation of these young people; rather, it is about asking ourselves about the formation we offer them. Some pertinent questions might be: On what human basis are spiritual skyscrapers built? What type of anthropology would serve the formation process? Are we convinced that grace builds upon nature? Do we favor dichotomies even though we affirm the opposite? Why don't young Sisters have similar experiences? Are women more realistic even though we men are more carnal? Do we suppress the instinctive in favor of the rational? Do we consider the spiritual to the detriment of the corporal? Do we continue to make allegories about Biblical texts while draining them of their human depth? Do we nurture the sense of community belonging? We could continue with similar questions.*

We live in a pluralist society, where axiological relativism is promoted as a criterion for resolving dissimilar social situations. The criterion of freedom is brought to the most sacred part of humanity: life itself, since it is considered to be an instrument for each individual, with total disregard for the Creator and for other human beings. On the other hand, to describe the more varied manifestations of cultures, the criterion that everything is equally valid is used, denying the need that all cultures have to be made more human and to be evangelized.

The provisional and the temporary are established in organizations, even in those ancient institutions such as the family. What is striking is the shorter and shorter duration of a good number of marriages. We know that the phenomenon is repeating itself inside our congregations and we are still concerned about the number of request for dispensations

coming from young religious shortly after their having made perpetual profession.

We live in a world that encourages individualism and intimacy. On the one hand, according to several authors, we are going from *homo faber* to *homo ludens*, from Prometheus to Narcissus, from the frugal man to the festive man, for whom the most important thing is not work but enjoyment. It is sufficient to look at modern psychology to discover that the center is the I. Freud spoke to us about satisfying the desires, Maslov about self-fulfillment by means of satisfying primary needs, and Adler about the affirmation of roles and superiority in confronting others.

There is no doubt that one of the great merits of today's world is the importance given to the personal I. But we know that this is about a relative value, because, according to the Gospel, *"whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will find it"* (Matthew 16:25). The ongoing challenge is to decenter ourselves from ourselves in order to center ourselves in God and in his plan of salvation in favor of humanity.

On the other hand, it seems that today, we have more difficulty with lasting commitments, of a long-term nature, where patience, stability, perseverance, determination, and effort might be necessary, to ensure the quality of spiritual life and the mission to which we have been called. Influenced by the environment, we can easily make our own the values that move society today: the provisional (temporal), feelings (the heart takes precedence over reason), the disposable (whatever is new and in style becomes the fashion).

We should not hide the fact that Consecrated Life represents a counter-cultural and dynamic movement that challenges patrons of an ambivalent society, whose values are more easily assimilated by young people, both its positive values as well as those which are at odds with the Gospel. Here, too, it is about a type of discernment and enculturation that allow us to be faithful to the signs of the times and to places. Our posture should be like that of the fishermen in the parable *who throw a net into the sea, which collects fish of every kind. When it is full they haul it ashore and sit down to put what is good into buckets. What is bad they throw away.* (Matthew 13: 47 - 48). Training to live joyfully and with dignity in a world given to us to evangelize, but which we must frequently oppose, is asceticism in practice. The fight for the values of the Kingdom involves personal and community effort, which gives meaning to existence, distances itself from narcissism, prevents depression, and allows one to live in the midst of conflict.

Today we should be very aware of the situation in which young people live as they face fragmentation and dispersion, with the danger of fascination for the immediate and the provisional that lead to an individualistic and relativist ethic that limits the search for values and is oriented towards an unsatisfactory search of "being together" with no clear direction no any defined project. The environment leads to seeking short-term values and to low-cost happiness. What we have to offer in religious life must be just the opposite.

If we are not able to center our religious life in the essential we run the risk of building on sand. Our religious life, understood as much as our natural inclination towards God as by the call of Jesus Christ to follow his life cannot have a greater foundation than that of a personal experience. It is about a deep, almost irresistible, attraction towards God, of a spiritual experience in which God is Absolute and in which our being's ultimate point of reference is in Him. It is the experience of loving and of being loved; it is the certainty that God is everything. If God is the ultimate reason of our following him, tsunamis and storms

can come and our boat may appear to be on the edge of sinking, but we will be able to press forward, not by our strength, but because in our weakness, God continues to be the ultimate reason for our life and we know that he is on our side. The fundamental goal of all processes of formation is to facilitate this experience.

The work of our 67th Assembly has a double objective:

1. By means of the report of Don Pascual Chávez Villanueva, Rector Major of the Salesians, we will be trying to deepen the reality of the person through considerations of an anthropological nature in which we can situate our formative proposals. The ultimate aim is that of helping to reinforce the fidelity of those called to a consecrated life which is not only of a spiritual nature but which is carried out fully also on the human side.
2. The second stage of our work will open with the report of Fr. José Rodríguez Carballo, Minister-General of the Friars Minor, and continue with the contributions of the whole assembly by means of the work groups. We wish to dwell in a particular way on ongoing formation, because we believe that this is the compulsory point of departure in offering to our young people an effective initial formation. Only persons and communities which are fully mature and well identified within themselves, with their own vocation and with the charism of the Institute, can become effective instruments for accompanying young religious.

I am sure that the reflections of these days and the reading of the pages which will gather together the results of our work, will be able to help in consolidating within our Institutes the human basis and the founding experience which will give greater solidarity to our following of Jesus, lived out in a creative and joyful fidelity.

I am sure that our reflections during these days will help us to strengthen within our Institutes the human substratum and the founding experience that will give more solidity to our following of Jesus, lived out in creative and joyful fidelity.

FIDELITY, SOURCE OF LIFE FULFILLED

Consecrated Life:

Anthropological prophecy in post-modernity

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this reflection, rather than pretending to be something "new", aims to stimulate common reflection. Because of this, I will try to be as faithful as possible to my title and to its meaning: Offering an anthropological framework in which we can locate proposals to help strengthen the fidelity of consecrated life of those called to it: with particular attention to the younger generation.

There is no doubt that the *fundamental* problem touches the core and very development of faith, beginning from personal and community experience of the God of Jesus Christ. Presupposing this, here we have to make a "methodological reduction" from a specific angle: Perhaps we can even get as close as possible to this issue where Nature and Grace, without being confused, are found and interact! In practice, the theme of fidelity (not only in its vocational sense) touches on such essential aspects of the person, that we must consequently of necessity surrender an attempt at a complete view, and instead be content to locate it within this anthropological framework.

On the other hand this problem is not exclusive to religious or consecrated life: It is sufficient to think of the dramatic circumstances, and very often tragic ones, of so many marriages and families in the world, even of Catholics! In the field of religious life, it affects recently founded Institutes, older Congregations and even monastic Orders, eremitical forms of life. And there's more: Although we are interested in the younger generation, the reference is not only to them: the possibility that one might pull back from the radical call of Jesus does not finish until death. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it so well and so acutely, the first words that the Lord said to Peter were also the last: "Follow me!"

Before dealing with the *content* of this reflection, it would be good to see it from its axiological point of view: are we dealing with a problematic situation, even a dangerous one which we have to defend ourselves from, or a *kairos* that, other than being inevitable, becomes a fascinating challenge for our creative fidelity to God, to Church and to humanity? I believe we are convinced that, notwithstanding the seriousness the situation calls for, it is the second alternative we are dealing with: It is the consequence of believing that the Holy Spirit continues to be present and active in our Church and in the world; but also because in this, as in many other aspects, we find the "law of the pendulum": our period dialectically emphasises elements that, explicably but unjustly, were overlooked in other eras. It is up to us, with the help of the same Spirit, to seek the right balance.

Put in symbolical terms: culture today, especially youth culture, has turned the kaleidoscope of anthropology upside down: It contemplates a completely new picture, but one in which we can recognise the same structural factors as in preceding cultures, reflecting the

light in a very different manner, and because of this, also projecting a different image. We believe, then, that we are dealing according to the happy expression of G. K. Chesterton, with one of those virtues that has gone "crazy": Let's hope the disease is not beyond recovery!

Still in formal terms, I thought it was better to choose one direction, amongst others, hoping it may be sufficiently relevant to offer us adequate paths for reflection. The alternative would have been to signal many elements, but of necessity superficially and without plumbing their depths. In other words, recalling the proverb: "He who wants too much doesn't catch anything", I've taken the opposite view: Taking up a little, in favour of much greater depth.

2. HISTORICITY, HORIZON OF AND ROAD TO HUMAN FULFILMENT

Without doubt, amongst many other factors that shape culture today, the "discovery" of human historicity is one of the most relevant. This is not to speak of something "new" that did not exist before, or that was not universally perceived. Rather it is to speak of coordinates of human existence that, because present everywhere and at all times, run the risk, paradoxically, of becoming elusive. It would be enough to take up some pages of Holy Scripture to see that the Word of God absolutely cannot be understood without the presupposition of human history. Without this, God's revelation, human freedom, sin and conversion would not exist.

This "implicit presence" of human history in Revelation accentuates, amongst other factors the value of the "today" faced with the past, and even the future: What counts is not, putting it in terms of an image, the weight of good or bad actions taken in balance, but the actual situation. We recall, amongst others, the famous text from Ezekiel: "If the evil-doer renounces all the sins he has committed, respects my laws and is law abiding and honest, he will certainly live, he will not die. All the sins he has committed will be forgotten from then on; he shall live because of the integrity he has practised" (Ez. 18, 21-22); Psalm 95 (94) says the same, as suggested at the beginning of the liturgical prayer of the day: "If today you hear the Lord's voice, harden not your heart" (v. 7-8); or, more dramatically, the moving words of Jesus on the cross to the penitent thief: "Indeed I promise you: Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk. 23, 43). This brings us, doubtless, to a more *qualitative* evaluation than a "quantitative" one of human existence, without identifying it, necessarily with the relationship between attitudes and acts in the moral arena. Therefore, speaking of "discovery", let's refer ourselves more precisely to the *explicit theme*, tied to philosophy, of the 20th century, (even if the roots are to be found at least from the 19th century on), and, more concretely, to existentialism, which constitutes one of the most valid and ongoing contributions of this current philosophy and culture.

As the title of this paragraph indicates, "*horizon and road*", we are saying that not only does the human being live in history (in the world and the entire universe, that can also be called, thanks to human intervention, "historical"): this è evident; but, more intrinsically, it seems to affirm that man is a "historical being" because he becomes himself, or destroys himself, in history: As much at the personal level, as at the community level, and even on a global scale: principally in an era where geographical coordinates give up their relevance more and more to historical ones, in this "global village" that our planet is becoming.

We are not only dealing with something of quantitative importance, a "something more"; but especially of a *qualitative relevance*, given that history constitutes a paradigm, sets itself up in the centre of a *Gestalt* that includes all the human structural elements in a new synthesis (harking back again to the image of the kaleidoscope).

This topicalizing of history has brought consequences to all fields of human existence: It is enough to recall the revolution it caused in thinking about *education and formation*, understood as "continuing formation", referred in first place not to specific or possible updating, as it is often thought to be, but to the belief that we are in formation for all of our life, and that, therefore, we cannot really think of anyone as already fully "formed." (Similarly, in the moral field, we do not think of a *homo viator* definitively lost, nor for that matter "confirmed in grace").

This brings with it a radical change in the manner of doing "initial formation", and even the following stage, called, inadequately "continuing formation", as if it was something that came after initial formation. Also keeping in mind that the most important thing is not changing the words, but renewing their content, we should at least mention the problem, not so simple a one, of the manner of carrying out this "initial formation" so that it is not something separate from what comes after, and even less some sort of antidote to it, but nor is it resolved by being a simple "first stage" of a process. At base, we are trying to clarify what it means to say that "ongoing (inasmuch as it is this) formation animates and guides initial formation."

From this perspective on history, we are fully in integration with those "key words" that currently "have a right to citizenship" even in consecrated life: the search for personal realisation. Here we are tackling an unavoidable aspect, but also a source of misunderstanding and of frustration even.

In this regard, I am happy to recall a clarifying text by Fr. Friedrich Wulf, SJ, speaking of the theological phenomenology of religious life:

"At the basis of religious life that seeks to have a theological and spiritual basis, we find a being affected by the Divine Mystery of the world and of life ... This impact is noted in three forms: As a being affected by God, by Jesus Christ or by the sorry state of the world. Here we see ideal types that only emphasise different centres di gravity, but never exist in pure form. They are strictly linked by the same content, that is, the content of Christian revelation. A being affected by God who does not include the decisive mediation and redeeming role of Jesus as a responsibility towards the salvation of the world and of others, would be so minimally Christian as a being concerned about the sad state of the world that he would not have the God of our salvation, revealed in Jesus as centre. Whoever chooses as his purpose in life, to the extent to which one can choose for himself, a mystique and contemplation that excludes the world, would be essentially guilty of cutting out the Christian salvific message, like one who thinks of his apostolic vocation only as a functional service. Despite this, there need to be priorities, emphases, because otherwise everything would continue to be theoretical and would not be adequate to the peculiarities of each individual, to his specific quality and personal vocation"¹.

This is all fully valid and a clarification; but is it not true that, together with this triple essential and inseparable motivation of religious and consecrated life - Absoluteness of God; following/imitation of Jesus Christ; salvation of the world - the concern for *personal fulfilment* is emphasised, at least implicitly? It can be too easy to ignore, and even exclude this

¹ F. WULF, *Fenomenología teológica de la Vida Religiosa*, in: *Mysterium Salutis IV/2*, Madrid, Ed. Cristiandad, 2ª Edición, 1984, p. 454.

aspect, as an expression of selfish individualism and an unhealthy individualistic "psychosis": nevertheless, if we read the Gospel carefully, we never find a rejection, on Jesus' part, of this: what the Lord does is *to indicate the right path* for this fulfilment. Is it not of significance that we have too often forgotten that the *beatitudes* are not religious or moral norms but *promises of happiness*?

Rather than rejecting or anathematising, we need to discern and clarify: It is only valid and fulfilling, in consecrated life, when we speak of a fulfilment in Christ, indissolubly tied to the three aspects. Evidently, there is a place here for right understanding and a putting into practice of the concept of *vocational suitability* that allows us to integrate both dimensions, objective and subjective.

One of the most fascinating aspects in the contemplation of the great saints, is to think of them as fully fulfilled and happy people. If we are called to be, as *Vita Consecrata* says, a "spiritual therapy" for the world of today, and we want to more deeply understand the "profound anthropological significance" of the evangelical counsels, we cannot ignore this dimension: It is not enough to live chastity, poverty and obedience in a radical and complete manner: We need, even at a human level, to have radiant and attractive attitudes, the expression of maturity and fullness (cf. *VC 87-91*).

3. FREEDOM, THE SUPREME VALUE OF HUMAN FULFILMENT

Within the paradigm of history, freedom takes on a decisive importance, particularly because the human being is understood not as something "pre-programmed", like a computer, even the most sophisticated, but as a person, someone who takes his own life into his own hands, can dispose of it, can decide what he wants to do with it; indeed: What he wants *to be*, by means of it.

In this sense, we can recall the deliberately exaggerated and provocative words of J.-P. Sartre: "Existence comes before being." No-one, no being, human or divine, can decide for me what I want to be. Behind this attitude we can find the expression of a more or less atheistic Prometheism, but also a challenge that helps us understand that God cannot desire from us, his children, a love and a commitment other than completely free.

It is appropriate to analyse freedom more in-depth as an essential dimension of the human being. Undoubtedly, we cannot accept a supremacy of freedom that seeks to set itself over and above every other moment or value: but nor can we reject it or preach against it. We often complain about a freedom that degenerates into licentiousness, etc.; but what is the shape and dynamic of this attitude, so as to be able to understand it, face it and respond to it?

In a way similar to history, this over-evaluation of freedom is not only quantitative ("the most"), but also qualitative, a *nucleus of a paradigm* around which all other values turn. When this is not taken into consideration, it makes it impossible to understand certain attitudes that seem contradictory.

I offer one example, not just by chance. Faced with the deplorable theme of sexual abuse and molestation, certainly never justifiable, and the no less deplorable manipulation of same, we note an often hypocritical "double standard" in society and in the midst of communication: How can it be possible that this society, which seeks to punish the least

failure in this regard, can at the same time tolerate its exacerbation in the form of an almost unlimited pornography? Seen from the paradigm of sexuality, this duplicitous attitude is incomprehensible; but from another paradigm, that of freedom, it is not only comprehensible but logical: at base it says that because we are dealing with adults (= 18 years plus), they can do what they like, with absolute freedom, so long as they don't injure a third party (recently: "in their freedom").

Obviously, I am not trying to justify this attitude; to the contrary, here we see, in my judgement, the *core* of the real problem. As indicated above, we are not only dealing with a quantitative evaluation (=exaggerated) of freedom, but *qualitatively*, it is seen as a paradigm of human self-fulfilment. Faced with this, we need to say: Freedom does not constitute a paradigm, is not the basic value which allows human fulfilment: It is, instead, the characteristic that must accompany every human value, so that it may be truly human.

Put in other words: freedom, as an adjective, has to accompany every *noun*: otherwise, the noun loses its character as *value*. Instead, when the adjective tries to become the *noun*, it absolutizes freedom, destroying itself, and destroying the being involved. (It is good to recall here the etymology of the word "absolute": *ab-solutus* reminds us of the "un-attaching" from anything else).

Against this formal absolutising of freedom, we can even quote an author who certainly could not be suspected of "asceticism", Federico Nietzsche:

*"Do you call yourself free? I would like to hear your dominant thinking, and just not that you have escaped from some burden.
Are you someone for whom it is licit to escape from a burden? More than one has thrown away his ultimate value by throwing away his ultimate form of slavery.
Free from what? Zarathustra was not interested in this! Your eyes have to tell me clearly: free for what?"*² (author's highlighting).

I would like to go deeper into this idea by turning to the thinking of someone considered, in literature, as the greatest knower of the human heart: F. M. Dostoevskij. It is common place to quote him as a writer who, more than anyone else, defended human freedom; nevertheless, he knew how to nicely present the risks of this very freedom when it tries to set itself up as an absolute value in human existence.

In the impressive range of Dostoevskij's characters, we find three who incarnate, from different angles, the temptation of absolute freedom, which runs the risk of self-destruction, and in two cases succeed (through suicide). From an *ethical* perspective, we find Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment* obsessed with the question of the possibilities there are in "superior men", and if they are allowed to do anything (and, concretely, if he is one of those exceptional beings); Kirillov, in the novel *The Demons*, who incarnates the *theological* radicalisation of freedom, pretending at the same time to supplant God, understood as a despotic and absolute Lord and Master of every freedom; and especially Stavrogin, in the same novel, from an *ontological* perspective: A fascinating character for all those around him, but we are dealing with a lovely statue which, unfortunately, in reality is inwardly empty.

² FEDERICO NIETZSCHE, *Así habló Zaratustra*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1984, 12ª Ed., p. 308.

One of the best scholars of Dostoevskij, Louis Pareyson, comments thus:

“His freedom is purely arbitrary, that, having no norm before him to violate, he does not even have a purpose to offer, and so revolves around emptiness, dissolving in apathy, in boredom, in laziness, in a kind of useless being and destructive inertia. His potential was great and fearful, as was the destruction that came from it: men that have come under his influence are lost; and he, ‘a dark and demonic character, posits the supreme problem: To be or not to be? To live or to destroy oneself?’ And he destroys himself: Suicide puts the stamp of nothingness on a life that had only nothing as its teaching”³.

Undoubtedly, these are extreme cases; but particularly for this reason, they outline to perfection the danger of a freedom that does not accept, humbly, that it is an *adjective* that must inseparably accompany the values it fulfils, humanly and, in our case, also in Christian and religious terms- the person: and in first place and especially, love, because there is no authentic love that is not free. Freedom is the undeniable *terminus a quo* of human fulfilment, under which we lose our human dignity, and we transform ourselves into the mob that follows the Great Inquisitor (and God frees us from being "great inquisitors" who act against the freedom of their brothers!): but in no way does it constitute the *terminus ad quem* of this fulfilment.

4. "...IT IS AN EXPERIENCE..."

Within this constellation of values (history – freedom – fulfilment) experience has a privileged place. A "magic" word, that has an intimate relationship with each of them: It advantages human *fulfilment*, in the perspective of *historicity*, as a privileged moment for the exercising of *freedom*.

Leaving the analysis, no doubt very rich, of the etymology of this word from various linguistic fields, especially Latin (ex-perior = expertus) and germanic (Erfahrung = er-fahren), we go directly to its typical meaning. Also here, it helps to explain that we are not dealing with a "new" reality: In various cultures there are proverbial expressions that show the difficulty of "learning from someone else's brain" and making a treasure out of it. To experience everything in first person has always been seen as something, while not always desirable, but in any case inevitable.

Besides: in practically all traditional cultures there are "initiation rites" that make possible the passage from one to another stage of life, *experiences* involving the complete person, and not only his intellectual or affective ability, but both dimensions at the same time, also his bodily reality often in painful ways. We need to add, nevertheless, that although these "initiation rites" persist in today's cultures⁴, often in disguised form, there is an essential difference: Today we do not seek, through these unique experiences, to be integrated with a mythical past, but to open ourselves to a promising future, rejecting – sometimes explicitly – their past.

In this experiential direction we can mention the *mystagogic* dimension of the Christian catechesis of the first centuries, that sought not only to prepare the catechumens through acquisition of knowledge, but get them to live an experience of encounter with the Lord Jesus

³ LUIGI PAREYSON, *Le Dimensioni della Libertà in Dostoevskij*, in: S. GRACIOTTI, Ed., *Dostoevskij nella coscienza d'oggi*, Firenze, Sansoni Ed., 1981, p. 110.

⁴ Cf., in this regard, the extraordinary work by MIRCEA ELIADE (for example, *Lo Sagrado y lo Profano*, Barcelona, Ed. Labor, 6a. Ed., 1985.

and, through Him, in the Holy Spirit, the Father. Also today, pastoral ministry, youth ministry especially, tries to develop this essential dimension. Not only this: Mystical experience is characterised particularly for this reason as drawing specifically from the encounter with the Triune and One God (it does not depend on human ability but is a divine Gift).

All this shows us that we are not faced with a difficulty to overcome but a very rich reality to discern and take up: overcoming, without doubt, the dangers it implies.

- a) Amongst these dangers we find, in the first place, its *formal* nature (similar to what we were saying about freedom). It gives the impression that each experience exists for the very fact of being such: How many times have we not heard, as justification for an unacceptable attitude, this explanation: "...it is an experience." Perhaps irreverently glossing the first letter of Peter: experience is similar to brotherly love, inasmuch as it is a garment that "covers a multitude of sins" (cf. 1 Pt 4, 8). Speaking from experience in formation, I have noted that, together with pride, it is one of the strongest structural impediments to penitence and conversion, since the alternative would be to be without experience, and this is seen, formally and *a priori*, as a limit and an impoverishment. It can come to the point of saying – thanks be to God not in consecrated life! - that any kind of sexuality, even the most aberrant, is preferable to abstaining from it altogether! It seems to me to be the extreme *formalist* evaluation of experience as such.
- b) This manner of thinking often misunderstands the meaning of 'experience. Already the fact of moving from the *singular* of "the" experience, as an expression of the wisdom of one who knows how to learn from life beginning with daily and habitual experience, to the plural *experiences* as extraordinary and exceptional moments, moving the emphasis from *attitude* to *act*. There is a Mexican song which says this wonderfully: "Nada te han enseñado los años, siempre caes en los mismos errores" ("The years have taught you nothing: You always make the same mistakes") which is the same as saying: "you have had lots of *experiences*, but you *have no experience*", you have not learned anything from life, you have not become an "expert" in life.
- c) From this unilateral over-appreciation of one's own experience come two great dangers for consecrated life today: *individualism*, because no-one else can take my place in learning from life: "it is my experience"; and along with this, *relativism*: "each one to his own thinking, according to his own experience": beyond this, everything else is an abstraction. There are no objective norms that can prevail over what "life has taught me".

I would like to take this point further. The spiritual direction of religious in initial formation has led me to the belief that problems, especially in the affective area, come largely from the *manner* in which they are tackled (or even of not tackling them); other than the 'ostrich' approach which, head buried in the sand, thinks that nobody has noticed (when, in reality, everyone is well informed, speaks about it with everyone else except the one involved), it is typical to begin from the presumption: "I have to experience this affective relationship alone, because no one else will understand: They will think – starting from my formators - that this is one girl like all the rest, when instead, she is a unique, unrepeatable individual", etc... Deep down, there is no doubt that each human being is unique and unrepeatable and for this reason one can't give "*a recipe*"; but we are all human beings, realistically, men or women, and for this reason there can be criteria that, other than the undeniable singularity of each situation, let us locate and discern it as objectively as possible, and especially to help one another.

- d) With a view to overcoming this formalism, we need to understand that what matters is

not only having experience, but the value of the experience we are having: That is, its content . Here we take up what was said previously, i.e. the need to overcome an intellectual type of education-formation that pretends to interiorise vital content without experiencing it. Put emphatically, and making it a play on words: what counts is not *the value of the experience*, but the experience of the value to be interiorised and assimilated. In the Salesian Constitutions, the central article which seeks to characterise formation as an ongoing process has as its title: "the formation experience", and is described thus: "the Salesian *learns by experience the meaning of the Salesian vocation at the various moments of his life and accepts the ascetical demands it makes on him*" (C SDB 98).

In Buddha's life we find a very meaningful legend and story. From the time he was born, his father wanted him to avoid any kind of 'negative' experience that that might endanger his optimistic view of life: in practice, old age, illness, death. Nevertheless, this concern was counter-productive: There only needed to be an occasion when, leaving the family home, he met up with many situations: a sick person, an elderly person and a funeral cortege – it was enough for him to be mired in a deeply depressing crisis.

Often, with the best of intentions, we want to do something similar in the different areas of consecrated life, especially in the initial stages.. But such an attitude, instead of being formative, is profoundly deformative. One needs to say, without doubt, that our young members, and not only the young ones, don't experience a crisis when they are looking at an old lady close to death, but rather looking at a beautiful young girl full of life: and especially when we have tried to keep them far from any 'dangerous' experience in the field of affective relationships with people of the opposite sex...

5. FORMATION TO RENUNCIATION

Finally, and still with regard to overcoming "formalism", we need to say something of a reality that in our age more than any other, means going "against the flow": Formation to renunciation. Put paradoxically, we need to favour the *experience of saying 'no'*. It is not a question of looking to times gone by where this exercise had a very formal nature: The most important thing there was learning to say no... to renounce, to "temper the will." Instead, it is essential to rediscover the human and Christian value of authentic renunciation, to be able to live an experience that is enriching, in a manner that can be taken positively, and which does not lead to nervous frustration.

In the short Gospel parable of the merchant with the precious pearl (Mt. 13: 45-46), we find some basic elements that allow us to describe the "phenomenology of renunciation":

- a) Precious pearls are renounced ("the merchant went and sold what he had") *not because they are false*: they are authentic after all, and up till then made up the merchant's wealth. Applying it to our reality, it is certainly not an appropriate method to try to diminish the value of what has to be renounced, to try make it something easy to do. Deep down, renouncing "bad things" does not make for the most profound and complete human renunciation. How many times have we heard the request, as a resistance to what has to be renounced: "what is bad about what I am doing"? And one who says this is right: only that s/he has to understand that it is precisely *then* that the opportunity presents itself to take up renunciation in its most authentic sense.
- b) Authentic pearls are renounced sorrowfully and at the same time cheerfully, because

"the" ultimate pearl has been found, the one that has fulfilled the merchant's vision and heart: and he understands that he cannot buy it unless he sells the other. If our consecrated life, centred on the following and the imitation of the Lord Jesus, is not fascinating, the renunciation it requires becomes unjust and dehumanising... As *Potissimum Institutioni* puts it so splendidly: "Only this love of a natural character implying all of a person's affectivity, will allow us to motivate and sustain the renunciation and the crosses that the one who desires to 'lose his life' for Christ and his Gospel necessarily finds along the way (cf. Mk. 8, 35)" (n. 9).

- c) The joy of possessing the "precious pearl" never eliminates the fear that *maybe it is not authentic*: Where it turns out to be false, my decision will have been mistaken, and I will have ruined my life. This "risk" in Christian life, and even more so in consecrated life, is a direct consequence of faith: only in faith does our life have meaning: If what we believe in does not have truth, "we are more unfortunate than any person", to paraphrase St. Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 15, 19). The day when, in whatever aspect of consecrated life, we can say: "my life is fully satisfying, even if what I believe in is not true", our Institute becomes an...NGO, with the further problem of demanding certain unacceptable requirements from its members...
- d) Playing with words again, we need not only to foster the experience of renunciation, but also, in many situations, *renunciation of experiences*, is needed, one of the most difficult things to understand and accept today. Let's think, for example, of the affective (and sexual) area: there are those who think, with the best of intentions, that renunciation will come more easily to them if they live out the corresponding experience: "at least, then I know what I am renouncing." Deep down this is a mirage: we cannot follow all the different paths that life offer us, to then choose in some subsequent step, the right path. What is decisive - and a solid formation has to help this along - is that the person maturely takes this *decision* (a word that connotes, in its etymology, "to cut"), and does not complain for the rest of his life about what he didn't experience, something which inevitably magnifies the experience: the forbidden fruit is always the most desirable.

6. THE CONTEXT TODAY: POSTMODERNITY

In the hope that everything said up to now respects, from a specific perspective, the anthropological situation of consecrated life, we need to ask ourselves: is all this a novelty in our own time? Or are we only dealing, as said initially, with a topicalization of aspects that were always there, at least implicitly?

Evidently we cannot speak of absolute "novelty", because this would be to ignore that, as human beings, there is an undoubtable similarity to every time and place. Using an expression of Mircea Eliade, we need to say that we have the same "archetypal structure" or, using a simpler image: even if the photograph taken of each one would be different, an X-Ray would be very similar.

Nevertheless, from the moment that we speak today of a new and qualitatively distinct era in the history of mankind, this implies factors that, at least to a greater or lesser degree, have radically changed. I refer to one, in practice, that is fully relevant to our discussion.

The human being, although always living in the present (this is a self-evident truth), is a "being of the future" (E. Bloch, W. Pannenberg): By his very nature, he is faced with a *utopia*, something that has as yet "not happened" in our world and in history. This can be said,

a fortiori, of the younger generation which carries this approach to the future in its very psychosomatic identity, written into the “humblest” cell.

This is why we see a tragedy in the postmodern situation: the threat of the future that weighs on humanity places us, especially for our younger generation, before an existential contradiction: on the one hand, with the irresistible need for a future horizon, and on the other, with the lack of this *horizon*. If we add to this the rejection of the past on the part of today's youth culture, we can understand its sensation of being “locked in” in the small space that the present provides, with no solution to enable one to “experience the fleeting moment” (*l'attimo fuggente*).

This threat shows up in a double way: on the one hand, in what J. Moltmann called “the loss of atomic innocence” from Hiroshima onwards.⁵ we know – and recent news items remind us- that for some decades, and for the first time in the history of the world and of mankind (from what we know), there exists the real possibility (depending concretely on the decisions made by some) that could see the entire human race disappear as a consequence of a nuclear conflagration. The fact that the leaders of nations may reach some possible agreement in this regard does not eliminate the danger. As the same Moltmann said, we can never get back our lost innocence.

“The era we live in, even if it were to last forever, is the final era of mankind... We are living in the end-times, that is when each day could bring about the end”⁶

On the other hand - and not totally unconnected with what went before – we find this threat in universal and irreversible ecological decline: think of air pollution, loss of drinkable water, destruction of forests, to the giddy exploitation of unrenowable energy. As Moltmann again said, “we are all equal... faced with the ozone layer.”

This “suppression from outside” of future horizons is a typical fact of our times, and is fundamental to the understanding of our obsessive attachment to the present, and the need for immediate “satisfactions” which are characteristic of the postmodern era: since it is not the same to “want to live ‘today’ ” in the perspective of tomorrow, anchored in today, because maybe tomorrow will not exist... Some days ago a newspaper, writing of a review of a book by the Hungarian writer Imre Kertész, Literature Nobel Prize-winner, used this expression: “Is it possible to have children after Auschwitz”? (which recalls a famous sentence: “Is it possible to believe in God after Auschwitz?”). It is the question that today so many young people ask when facing marriage and family: not with the illusion of earlier times, but with the anxiety of facing the future touching them; is it worth bringing new beings into the world?

Undoubtedly this “privation of the future”, in a totally different sense, also affects consecrated life, especially for new generations.

7. “... I CHOOSE EVERYTHING...!”

We could continue to plumb the depths of the topic of postmodernity, but by going to specialised studies that you know well. I would prefer rather to invite you to reflect on the present and the immediate future of consecrated life, rather than theoretical ideas, by

⁵ Cfr. JÜRGEN MOLTMANN, *La Catastrofe atomica: e Dio, dov'è?*, Urbino, Il Nuovo Leopardi, 1987, p. 11.

⁶ Ibidem, quoting Günther Anders.

contemplating a figure of holiness currently typical in the Church: Saint Teresa of Lisieux.

Amongst her many experiences, today we emphasise, rightly, the lack of belief and atheism the Saint experienced towards the end of her life. She knew how to discover God as gift, and to take this on in a most positive way, as a kind of solidarity with those "far from God." Now I want to emphasise another aspect. Amongst the many memories of her infancy, one, quite ordinary to look at, is particularly significant. One day her sister Leonia, thinking she was too old to play with dolls, went to find her with a basketful of little dresses and bits and pieces for making other ones, for each of the sisters to choose from. When it was little Teresa's turn, she tells us: "*I put out my hand saying: I'll take the lot!, and without further ado took the whole basket*"⁷ We could say: this is a typically "postmodern" approach, for someone who does not want to renounce anything.

We are not talking about an outburst of infantile selfishness: I believe it shows a very deep aspect of her personality. In fact many years later, in one of the most important moments of her spiritual discernment, this urge flourished again in pages that have become a classic in Christian spirituality:

"I sense other vocations in myself: I sense the vocation of the soldier, the priest, the apostle, the doctor, the martyr; in short, I feel the need, the desire to accomplish for you, Jesus, all the most heroic deeds... I feel in my soul the courage of a crusader, of papal knight: I would like to die on the battlefield in defence of the Church ... How can I reconcile these contrasts? How can I realise the desires of my poor little soul? ... During prayer my desires made me suffer a true and proper martyrdom. I opened the Letter of Saint Paul to find some answers... I read that not everyone can be an apostle, prophet, doctor, etc.; that the Church is made up of different members, and that eye cannot be the hand at the same time... The answer was clear, but it did not assuage my desires, it did not give me peace ... Without being discouraged I kept reading and this sentence struck me: 'You zealously seek the most perfect gifts: but I will show you one more excellent still.' And the apostle explains how all the most perfect gifts are nothing compared with love ... Finally I had found the answer!... Charity gave me the key to my vocation ... I understood that only love made the members of the Church do what they do: that if love should die out, the apostles would no longer announce the Gospel, the martyrs would refuse to spill their blood... I understood that love embraces all vocations, that love was everything, that love embraced all times and every place... In brief, that love is eternal! Well then, in the fullness of my delirious joy I cried out: Oh Jesus my Love...! I have finally found my vocation! My vocation love"!...⁸

Only to the extent to which we focus all our being on love for God and our neighbour, and act so that all of lifelong formation has the purpose of growing in love, can we achieve what seems impossible: having "everything in just a fragment" (recalling Von Balthasar). This way we can bring about, in routine and in life's limits, and in the "uniqueness" of our life, the totality of the Christian vocation: We will understand that in love the extraordinary paradox of being able to renounce everything can be realised and, at the same time and precisely because of it, not renouncing, deep down, anything that can allow us to realise complete fulfilment; this was how the little Saint of Carmel understood it and experienced it...

⁷ S. TERESA DI GESÙ BAMBINO, *Opere Complete*, Roma, Libreria Editrice Vaticana – Edizioni OCD, 1997, p. 91.

⁸ *Ibidem*, 221-223

8. FIDELITY IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

All that we have said, basically, tries to give a consistency to our consecrated fidelity, in the difficult but fascinating times in which we live. We already indicated from the outset that certainly today's culture does not favour the practice of fidelity: In some settings even marital fidelity is the "exception."

The biblical motivation in this regard is huge and fascinating. The Hebrew word generally translated by "fidelity", *hésed*, connotes in the first place, especially when applied to Yahveh, *solidity, strength*, persistence over time, in contrast to the fragility of human promises. As a consequence the Covenant is drawn up, as much from a "juridical" angle as especially in the basic motivation that makes it possible, that is the solidity of God's love. In this sense, a great exegete comments: "*The most wonderful thing about the People of Israel, is not so much that God loves them, but the fact that this love was faithful, lasting, despite everything*"(E. Jacob).

There are two psalms in particular which sing of this *fidelity* of God's love: 117 (116) which, in its brevity, is a real jewel: "Praise the Lord, all you peoples... because strong is his love for us, and the fidelity of the Lord lasts forever".

Similarly, the "great Hallel" (136 (135)), sings not so much of the divine love but of its fidelity: "because his Love has no end." This guarantee of the love of God that is firm, solid, faithful, finds its fullness in the New Testament, in the new and eternal Covenant, in Jesus Christ.

Consecrated life is in its deepest essence, a nuptial covenant with God and depends on his guarantee; unfortunately, the human "partner" in the Covenant can err; but even in this case, "He remains faithful, for he cannot disown his own self" (2 Tim. 2, 10).

It would be very enriching to locate fidelity within the "paradigm" of historicity. Since it is impossible for me to develop this at length, I will only mention some relevant aspects.

At the beginning we pointed to the *ongoing* nature of formation, the following and imitation of Jesus Christ "until death." Nevertheless it is worth going deeper into this "ongoingness" so that what happens to many spouses does not also happen to us - continuing to live together through "inertia", since the nucleus that gave meaning to their covenant, love, has disappeared. If we begin from the belief that "formation is the free response to vocation", we can draw the following conclusion: *ongoing formation can continue to exist only if there is also the experience of ongoing vocation*. The Lord did not call 10, or 20, or 50 years ago: He calls us today, at 10, or 20, or 50 years of age. Uniquely this joyful experience of a God who loves us and calls us, makes a likewise joyful and fully faithful response possible. In an almost imperceptible manner we have included history here, experience, freedom and personal fulfilment in Christ.

It nevertheless remains a problem to which today's generation is especially sensitive. We cannot deny the generosity with which many young men and women give themselves to the service of the others, often in a total way; nevertheless this happens for a determined period of time: the most difficult thing is to take on a definitive commitment, pronouncing a "*for ever*", renouncing every alternative possibility in principle. "What if life should show me other paths? What if I should find the man/woman who will make me happy? What if circumstances, place, community, work where I find myself should change radically?" All these questions agree in the fact that they make fidelity depend on a future *outside of us*, which we cannot manage ourselves. Faced with that

it is necessary to emphasise, in all stages of formation (until death), that authentic fidelity does not depend on what “can happen”, but on what I have decided, and which I renew daily: My faithful love for the Lord, in the total giving of myself to my brothers and sisters.

Fidelity has a *typical* feature that distinguishes it from other virtues. We can compare it, in the fine arts scene, to music, compared with painting, sculpture. In a single moment of time I can contemplate a beautiful statue or a famous painting, but I cannot listen, *at one and the same time*, to both the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven and The Magic Flute by Mozart: Here we need an explanation, time and “historicity”... In similar fashion, fidelity cannot be realised except as an “historical” experience... Fidelity has no fear of the future, precisely because it can only be realised as such in the future; and especially when talking of fidelity of love and in love, lived in fullness, even at a human level only on the horizons of “forever”. Nietzsche said: “All cheerfulness demands eternity.” Paradoxically, what seems to be at risk becomes the indispensable condition for future possibility.

I would be happy to finish this section with a very beautiful text that I am certain many of you have heard or read some decades ago. It is taken from the famous letter on Priestly Celibacy by Karl Rahner. Addressing himself to the one who is speaking with him, he asks:

"What value will these juridical questions have for you and all the juridical suggestions for the future, if you remain faithful to your life and your basic decisions? Basically, none. Would you let me express myself clearly and honestly? I do not await the "future", like that awful mask in Freiburg Cathedral representing an elderly Sister showing her last tooth to let it be known that it was never too late to get married. I have already chosen... I am a priest. I have not complained about this".⁹

9. CONCLUSION

If I were to finish this reflection with an invitation to make a relationship between the theological virtues and the dimensions of time, I imagine it would seem out of place and irrelevant. I will try to show its validity, as a conclusion and projection for the future.

Cervantes says, in his *Quijote*, that there is no book, no matter how bad it is, that does not have something good about it. I apply this to a work that appeared in the '60s, and that was considered the most radical expression of the “theology of the death of God”: *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, by the American theologian Thomas J. J. Altizer¹⁰. The kindest critics comment on this book ironically, that it was not gospel, atheism nor Christian. Nevertheless, towards the end the author throws out a challenge (such is the title of the last chapter) that we can take up and that allows us to understand better what we want to say.

The author places “the theological virtues” (without using that term as such) in strict relationship with the dimensions of time: faith with the past, hope with the future, love with the present; then says: anyone who wants to base himself on faith is still in an anachronistic past; whoever wants to live in hope, is taking refuge in a future that doesn't exist; it is then necessary to reject both approaches, in order to live in the constant present in love; Christian life is reduced to this alternative, according to Altizer. In some way this same idea is found in the postmodern interpretation of the Incarnation of the Son of God in Gianni Vattimo, in his book *Crederci di Crederci*.

⁹ KARL RAHNER, *Siervos de Cristo*, Barcelona, Ed. Herder, 1970, p. 206.

¹⁰ THOMAS J. J. ALTIZER, *Il Vangelo dell'Ateismo Cristiano*, Roma, Ubaldini Ed., 1969.

As said before this relationship between theological virtues and temporal dimensions is a suggestive one, although its nature as an "alternative" may be unacceptable: either one or the other. On the contrary, only in its total integration, as a triple theological attitude, with a solid anthropological basis, can these three virtues find their full meaning. Even though the fact that love is the most important is not up for discussion, it is necessary to emphasise that *there is no Christian love without Christian faith and without Christian hope*: "This is his commandment: that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and we love one another, as he told us to" (1 Jn 3, 23).

Instead of complaining about our present times, let us trustfully take up, in the Lord, the challenge that he gives us: only beginning from a solid faith that nurtures a 'living hope' and manifests itself in a concrete and unconditional love for God and our brothers and sisters in whom we see the face of the Lord Jesus, can our fidelity in consecrated life be relevant, as it has been in the tradition of our Institutes, beginning with our Founders and Foundresses. Only a present which is faithful to its past and open to its future can be relevant and meaningful, in the continuous present of the service of God and the world, out of love.

A tree is healthy and strong when its roots go down into the dark depths of the earth; when its trunk points to the skies, receiving the sap the roots give it and fostering through its leaves and branches the birth and maturity of its fruits. Without the roots of faith re-fashioned in a concrete and real historical past, without the trunk of hope that launches us towards the future, and without the fruits of love, ever present, we will be a dried up tree that would be better chopped down and used as wood or left simply to rot. Let us ask the Spirit of the Lord, with the maternal help of Mary to enliven our Institutes in such a manner that each one makes up a wood, a forest that offers fresh shade, purifies the polluted air breathed by our world and produces fruits of salvation in abundance for all the brothers and sisters whom the Lord sends us!

REPORT OF THE WORKING GROUPS

Francesco Cereda, SDB

In understanding human life and its possibilities there are some constant elements that could be said to constitute an intercultural and generally accepted view. Happiness and self realization, desires and aspirations, affectivity and emotions are opportunities and challenges. We will present a synthesis of these anthropological aspects that, while challenging, must be dealt with in any consecrated life that wants to be fully human and therefore credible. These constitute the basis for vocational fidelity.

Authenticity

The present anthropological situation offers the religious life an opportunity for a new authenticity. Today's culture, especially among young people, prizes authenticity. People want to see religious as happy individuals. They want to see that what we say is consistent with what we do and that our words are genuine because they spring from a coherent life.

Authenticity is a real *opportunity* because it corresponds to the generosity and the desire of young people for community, for a giving of self and for the joy of relationships. These aspirations are strong and deeply seated and can promote growth in a genuine consecrated life and in self giving love. It is an opportunity that promotes and encourages the elder members of our communities to be real models that are both attractive and challenging, in living the love of Christ that inspired them to embrace the consecrated life and to understand that they have a role to play in the formation of the younger generation. Authenticity is an opportunity that demands attention to the human dimension of the consecrated person and to the daily life of the community.

Authenticity is also a challenge since it is a matter of returning to what is essential, especially to go beyond a functionalism that reduces the consecrated life to a role, job or profession that poisons the passion for self giving to Christ and to humanity. Authenticity challenges a consecrated life that is daily threatened by mediocrity and inertia, and from the danger of confusing itself with and succumbing to the values of the "world."

Freedom

To be a person means to have life in one's own hands, that is to decide what needs to be done with one's own life. Freedom is the responsibility to create oneself, it is possibility and future.

Freedom is *an opportunity* because it is only by being free that one can arrive at an interiorization of values and an appropriation of formational development and therefore at a real maturity.

Freedom is also a *challenge* since it needs to be able to put together self-realization and action, self-formation and accompaniment, including spiritual direction. It is necessary to give to young people all the time needed to develop and mature at their own rate; there is not always a correspondence or coherence between the canonical stages and the stages of maturity and personal decision. A mature, personal decision does not always take place at the time of presbyteral ordination or final profession. For this reason, formators able to personalize the formation process are needed.

Historicity

A human is a being *in fieri* and society is in continual evolution. Persons construct themselves in time; their autobiography is a link connecting a diversity of experiences. The narrative of one's own history makes one's identity possible.

Historicity therefore is *an opportunity* because it makes us recognize that our life is a journey and our formation is a process that never ends. Life is self realization and construction. Life is a kind of constant music that plays from initial formation to on-going formation. The changes in life push the consecrated life to renew and adapt, inviting it to rearticulate itself in the language of contemporary humanity.

Historicity is also a *challenge* since it requires that formation, insofar as it is on-going, animate and orient all of initial formation. It is not sufficient to focus on young people and their formation. The whole community and Institute must be engaged by encouraging all of the members to relive "their first love"—their vocational passion that they had at the beginning of their consecrated life. One's life journey also runs of risk of being narcissistically self obsessed unable to open itself to self-giving. In a changing world that lacks a center, it is the parts rather than the big picture that dominate. Formation, then ought to serve to unify the person and center him/her on the essential which is following Christ.

Experience

Today it is necessary to go beyond an intellectualized formation approach that claims to be able to transform the individual without experience. There is a great desire for experience today. The most moving experiences are sought out. There is a desire to have one's own experiences.

Experience is *an opportunity* since when it is learned from life, formation becomes more personalized, concrete and profound. This is necessary for everyone, not only young people. Adult confreres also need strong and authentic experiences of God, of the charism, of the poor, of fraternal and in-depth relationships.

Experience is also a *challenge* because it can become an end in itself rather than lead to a real transformation. Different experiences may be fragmentary and disconnected. The help of a spiritual director is therefore necessary who can bring together the experiences and promote an interiorization of values. It is not a question of trying to provide a lot of experiences, but to choose a few that are well prepared and meaningful linked with a real pedagogical approach so that *experiences* become *experience*.

Human Relationship and Affectivity

In today's culture a great need is felt for authentic human relationships. Young people have a real thirst for fraternity and friendship, informal and affectionate relationships. Adults also seek enriching and significant relationships. In order for it be prophetic, community life must have something to say regarding the capacity to weave relationships and it also must be attractive because of its human face.

The desire for relationship constitutes an *opportunity* since journeying toward a deepening of human relationships personalizes fidelity and makes it possible to invite others

to enter into a real relationship of authenticity and communication—especially relationships of love and commitment with the person of Jesus Christ. Fraternity involves daily issues of living together. A need to enlarge the circle of relationships and to heal feelings is also part of the concern of fraternity.

Fraternity also constitutes a *challenge* since it requires a focus on conversion and on the renewal of our communities. What kind of interpersonal atmosphere does the young candidate find in our communities and what kind of communication do the adult confreres find? It's a challenge that takes the forms of "regenerating" the community, especially when it is growing older. It's a challenge because it is not easy to find balanced and able formators who can take this personal approach and know how to avoid individualism, going beyond the private, able to offer wise personal accompaniment and adequate spiritual direction. It is therefore difficult to build emotional and affective equilibrium in our relationships and in our experience of life.

Renunciation

Renunciation is a part of life and therefore also part of the consecrated life; when it is practiced in a positive way it becomes a liberating and enriching experience. It is not possible to choose everything, even though whoever lives for love and chooses love lives a totalizing experience.

Renunciation is an *opportunity* to live our consecrated life with authenticity to make of it a real "spiritual therapy" for humanity. It purifies and makes love true.

Renunciation is also a challenge because the consecrated life offers a privileged way of life, often sparing the consecrated person from having to deal with the problems and toil of normal life. Even the temptation to consumerism, the comfortable life, well being, travel and the ownership of personal media affect consecrated persons in all cultures. There is a need to turn to the essential of our life and our structures. Especially for young people, but not exclusively, renunciation can be a problem. We need to help them understand that it is not a question of sacrificing something, but to choose something, rather someone—the Lord Jesus and discipleship. True freedom, joy and fulfillment are found in this choice. It means to be open to permitting Jesus to enter our life and take the first place being freed from those tendencies that prevent us from making and living this radical choice.

Fidelity

Fidelity is the consequence of the choice that the consecrated person makes for God, kindling in his/her life the fire of the passion for God and for the Lord Jesus, even to the perpetual offering of one's life.

Fidelity is an *opportunity* because it makes the relationship with the Lord Jesus and his Reign progressively more profound and personal. It allows the religious to affirm God as an absolute and constant value that stands firm in the whirlwind of cultural change. Fidelity helps the religious to see the world with positive eyes and to perceive positive experiences of fidelity in the family, community, and church as the action of the Spirit in history. It also allows us to see meaning in the sacrifices that the consecrated person is called upon to make.

Fidelity is also a *challenge* because it is shaken by the fragmented and impermanent situation of the culture. In this sense it needs to be constantly supported both personally and communally in order to pass from narcissism to a dying to self in following Christ. In addition, fidelity cannot remain only at the conceptual level but must become a living fidelity, and encounter with Christ that involves the whole person and leads the religious from the “experiences” to grounded “experience.” Moreover, the fidelity of the consecrated person is an on-going challenge to deepen the answer to the daily question: to whom am I faithful? Fidelity is a challenge that requires the creation of a faithful community that generates fidelity that helps in going from superficiality to the deep roots of faithfulness that builds and renews fidelity to the charism and is familiar with the journey and the dynamic nature of the process. Fidelity is no longer exclusively considered as a reality that lasts one’s whole life, but can exist as fidelity for “a time.” For this reason the possibility is often raised of incorporating some kind of temporary commitment in the consecrated life.

Postmodernity

In order to be prophetic for the postmodern world, the consecrated life must be attractive and help the world to re-discover its beauty.

In general the confrontation with postmodern culture is *an opportunity* to propose the values of the consecrated life as an encouragement, purification and alternative to the values of the world. For example, fidelity in a culture that boasts of being unfaithful; the life of faith is a society that never refers to religious values; optimism and hope in a world full of fear. It is also an opportunity to direct the generosity of young people, their thirst for fraternity, their desire for fulfillment, their search for God.

The confrontation with postmodern culture is also a *challenge* because the media promises a false but attractive happiness; it is only necessary for us to offer, especially to young people, a personal and authentic experience of Christ and to demonstrate with words and actions that the consecrated life promotes full human development. What is needed is a new charismatic, prophetic and credible presentation of the consecrated life. At the same time there is a need for a new balance between the charism is its renewed freshness and in its historical expressions.

Multiculturality

We live in a world that is fast becoming a “global village.” From cultural individualism we are moving to encounter with different cultural ways of being—not without resistance, of course. It is a world characterized by globalization, rapid change, complexity, fragmentation and secularization. The consecrated person sees in all this the action of the Spirit of God— in all of these situations the Spirit moves where, when, and as it wills.

Cultural diversity is an opportunity because it favors solidarity, welcoming diversity, experiences of volunteerism, empathy toward the poor, ecological awareness, and the search for peace. It also favors the internationalization and the experience of universality of the community of the consecrated life as openness to serve where one is asked. In this way the charism is enriched. It promotes a search for knowledge, and a spirit of welcoming and dialogue among the young generation.

Cultural diversity is also a challenge because it is difficult for the majority of adult consecrated persons to enter into a multicultural situation. The need to rethink the language and the manner of transmitting values arises between very different cultural worlds. The task of formation to promote fidelity in a world that is constant changing and culturally pluri-directional, and to promote a life of faith in a society that does not tend to base itself on religious and Christian values are difficult tasks, indeed, since this very formation ought to be on-going and open to intercultural experiences.

The richness and diversity of the human being possible today offers great opportunities that need to be appreciated, and implies new tasks for formation in the consecrated life. This does not exclude the important and determining contribution of the grace of the Spirit that acts in the psychological and anthropological dimensions of the person. Formation therefore needs to be attentive to following the lead of the Spirit manifested precisely in these human dimensions, working with them to develop maturity and fullness in the lives of consecrated persons.

FORMING FOR A FULL LIFE IN ORDER TO AVOID DEPARTURES AND TO STRENGTHEN FIDELITY

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The phenomenon of departures from the consecrated life rightly continues to preoccupy us. We can no longer limit ourselves to gathering data —often distressing and constant— or even to analysis. Because we sense the need, we want to ask ourselves how we can confront this situation by allowing it to challenge our quality of life, our radical following of the Lord and, therefore, our formation. We wish to allow ourselves to be questioned because we recognise that departures touch in an urgent way our life and mission as religious and consecrated people.

The interpretations we could give to departures are multiple. On the one hand, we could read them as a symptom of a problem we wish to recognise and name, and on the other, as an invitation to evaluate seriously our choice of values and methods in our ways of doing ongoing and initial formation.

In these reflections, without dwelling on too many practical examples, I deliberately propose to offer some orientations for forming to a full life and, in this way, to prevent departures and strengthen fidelity as much as possible. As it could not be any other way, I assume that the indications offered should be incorporated later into concrete options of animation in on-going formation and in the different stages of initial formation.

With regard to on-going formation, I recall, only briefly, the importance of personalised accompaniment, keeping in mind the different phases of life, with particular attention to the first years after solemn or perpetual profession¹¹ and to the corresponding incorporation into local communities and apostolic ministry. With regard to initial formation, I underline the importance of evaluating the different stages and point out especially the need to personalise formation methods and programs. In addition, I consider a clear option for personal accompaniment and for a “practical” dimension of integral formation, as well as the need to sustain the quality of studies, to be important as an intellectual and spiritual resource to promote vocational fidelity through the years.

1. Are departures a problem to which we must be more attentive?

Our readiness to read the phenomenon of departures as a sign of an internal problem of present-day consecrated life should not arise from a guilt complex on our part, but rather from our openness to form ourselves by facing delicate and difficult situations. We have to recognise that the exit of a religious from his/her Order or Institute is not something that can be considered solely as a private matter, but which should be studied well within the whole community.

¹¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 1996, 71.

Faced by the departure of one of our own, we should ask ourselves: Why does one of us, at a determined time, decide to end a life-long project embraced for years —at times, for many years— and frequently with great generosity? What does such an action say to our community? Can this departure throw light on some aspects of formation needing evaluation and correction? Usually the topic of departures is suppressed among us and treated exclusively as the individual's problem.

This perspective has to be overcome. None of us is an island. Each one of us is intimately linked to others. From a genuinely Christian anthropological point of view, the person is capable of relationships, or rather, the person is a *being in relationship*. Whatever happens to each individual is of interest to, provokes, and puts into question the wider context in which he/she lives. It is from within the capacity for relationships that we look on the person as a mystery, as "*being there for the other*"¹². When the person is seen in this way we are not amazed that personal and relational aspects are intimately united to the point of illuminating the very transcendental dimension of the person. In fact, as Lévinas states, "*the divine dimension is perceived in a human face*"¹³. This perspective is prophetically relevant at a time of conflict and of individualistic affirmations of identity: "*In future ages –the third millennium- the other and his/her profile should be transformed into terms that are understandable to all, biblically, he/she is one's neighbour, and a culture of peace will be developed about him/her, the Gospel, finally, beginning to shine forth*"¹⁴.

In the light of these considerations I am convinced that the phenomenon of departures can furnish valid elements for us to re-read wisely, without succumbing to the emotions of the moment, some aspects of present-day consecrated life, which is undoubtedly going "*through a difficult and trying period [...] of tension and struggle*", and from which it seems difficult to distinguish the other bank, although there is no lack of "*hopes, new experiments and proposals aimed at giving fresh vigour to the profession of the evangelical counsels*"¹⁵. We have to accept living in this kind of situation without being too hasty to find ways to escape from it, because it is there that the word which the Lord is addressing to us lies hidden. Without such asceticism we will only find a partial and fleeting message lacking the vitality of the Spirit, who animates and makes creative our intelligence and will¹⁶.

We wish to be fully aware that the consecrated life "is going through days when the Spirit of the Lord is generating a new reality, difficult to name... In today's consecrated life, it is very difficult to point out what does not correspond to the Spirit and causes more than a little suffering. It is even more difficult to identify the seeds which will produce real signs of vitality, yet this is an unavoidable task"¹⁷.

Let us not question ourselves about the phenomenon of departures, though, with the naive pretension of finding easy recipes for getting around the problem. Rather let us do so in order to allow ourselves to be purified and enlightened during a time of great trial, with trust in the great possibilities it offers us.

¹² Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 7.

¹³ LÉVINAS Emanuel, *Totalidad e Infinito*, p. 76.

¹⁴ MANCINI Italo, *Tornino i volti*, ed. Marietti, p. 69.

¹⁵ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consacrata*, 1996, 13.

¹⁶ Cf. TODISCO Orlando, *Lo stupore della ragione. Il pensare francescano e la filosofia moderna*, Padua 2003, 132 ff.

¹⁷ Cf. ARNAIZ José M., "Discernere per iniziare una nuova tappa. The World Congress on the Consecrated Life" in *Vita Consacrata* 2004/5, 454.

In this perspective, I propose three possible spheres which are impacted by departures. The first has to do with the identity of the consecrated life, the second with the gap between our theoretical affirmations and the quality of our everyday life, and finally, the third with personal and institutional frailty.

1.1 The charismatic identity of the consecrated life

This is not the place to reflect on the question of the identity of the consecrated life. I will limit myself to simply recalling central questions about the charismatic identity of the religious life, which are more urgent today than ever. Faced by an evident crisis, however, we are aware that theology, social analysis, and even spirituality, are not enough. We are, it seems, too preoccupied with containing the internal crisis of our institutions and not concerned enough with heightening the tension of the Spirit who is impelling us towards the future¹⁸. We are afraid to take the risk of listening to the word of God and reading the signs of the times¹⁹. The obvious crisis and our preoccupations lead us to understand that we must take one more step in order not to remain prisoners of our analyses and our defences. Our charismatic identity comes to us as an ever-new gift from the Spirit of God who acts in the life of each one of us as well as in the history of the Church, the world and our community. Our identity is a gift which must be asked of God by disposing ourselves to receive it. The identity of consecrated life is not so much an objective fact which we must defend, but rather an ever new event which we never totally possess.

Listening to and knowing personally about many departures, as well as about the fragile sense of belonging of many who remain despite themselves, can enable us to understand the identity crisis we face. The crisis comes not only from the intellectual fact of departures or from confusion about the *orthodoxy* of the consecrated life, but rather from efforts to let our charismatic identity be constantly opened to the Spirit acting in our history. For some of us, the questions *Who am I? Who are we?* become, at a certain moment, inconsistent with and incapable of corresponding to the following of Christ through the consecrated life. Besides *orthodoxy*, what is also—I would say especially—involved is *orthopraxis*²⁰, which is the vital sense of meaning that motivates our radical and definitive choices in times of fragmentation during precarious moments.

1.2. The abyss between theory and practice

One of the signs of the identity crisis directly touching especially on-going formation is the enormous abyss between our theoretical discourse (theology, official documents, steps towards re-foundation, etc.) and the practical truth of our following of Jesus and the concrete creativity of forms of life which correspond to our times.

True, expecting social groups such as religious Institutes to remain forever faithful to the high standards of discipleship is difficult. It is nevertheless important to work on motivating and stimulating individual small groups to start anew from the centre of our life option, which is the Gospel, our highest authority and inspiration. In this way we could live in the present with an eye toward future and not to the past²¹.

¹⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 1996, 110.

¹⁹ cf. GARRIDO Javier, *Identidad carismática de la vida religiosa*, Frontera Hegian 43, Vitoria/Gasteiz 2003, 9-17.

²⁰ cf. BINI Giacomo, *The Order Today, reflections and perspectives*, Rome 2000, III, 1, 27-28.

²¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Novo millennio ineunte*, 2001, 3.

The gap between theory and practice becomes particularly problematic at the passage of religious to the ordinary life and services of local communities at the end of initial formation, which is often carried out in very “protected” environments. Often, the kind of life towards which initial formation orients is not to be found. This reality makes it particularly difficult to sustain the impulse and enthusiasm of men and women impassioned with Christ and with humanity, happy to live their vocation today and not yesterday, and endowed with a profound sense of Church. They must respond to a vocation which is not theirs, as if vocation were a question of something private rather than a gift and a sign for the good of all. Also, personal and community limitations, infidelity or lack of vocational response, fears and closing in on self, all add to the danger of making the abyss between theory and practice greater and of weakening our significance today²².

This abyss further weakens choices that are already fragile from the point of view of human maturity and the options of faith. The weakening is often silent, becoming manifest only after decisions have already been made and are scarcely communicated to the authorities! Would this not also be the consequence of situations where communication is too weak and dysfunctional, not always capable of touching people or of having the desired effect? Indeed —as the Instruction *Fraternal life in Community* recalls— “*The lack of or weakness in communication usually leads to weakening of fraternity: if we know little or nothing about the lives of our brothers or sisters, they will be strangers to us, and the relationship will become anonymous, as well as create true and very real problems of isolation and solitude [...]. This problem should be dealt with explicitly. It requires, on the one hand, a tactful and caring approach which does not exert pressure; but it also requires courage and creativity, searching for ways and methods which will make it possible for all to learn to share, simply and fraternally, the gifts of the Spirit so that these may indeed belong to all and be of benefit to all (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7)*”²³.

1.3. Personal and institutional frailty

In the western world especially, but in my experience not only there, it is undeniable that the consecrated life is going through a time of institutional and personal weakness linked to many factors such as our inexorable aging, the scarcity of new vocations, the problem of maintaining or renewing structures and works, etc.

These and other situations hinder us from implementing what we have put down with great accuracy in writing in our official documents: an acceptable quality of the life of faith, of brotherhood, of mission and of the unity between what we say and what we do. We also suffer a crisis of *credibility* because of this. Undoubtedly the noble principles and intuitions which our writings proclaim do motivate and sustain vocations in people; they do not, however, always find it possible to live up to them. Here again we come up against personal frailty which causes commitments to diminish, often because there is not a communal context capable of supporting them. If at one time it was possible to form autonomous and strong personalities capable of confronting all difficulties, today we must recognise the need to form one another to live not as solitary navigators, but as persons capable of entering into relationships, of sharing and cooperating with others, as well as of involving themselves personally in relationships and work. This shift is an important step, which we realize to be still incomplete; consequently it is a contributing reason for difficulties in perseverance and in the quality of life for those who remain.

²² cf. “*International Congress of the Consecrated Life, Work Document*”, 45-51, in *Passione per Cristo passione per l’umanità*, Milan 2005, 38-40.

²³ CICLSAL, *Fraternal life in community*, 1994, 32; cf. Paul VI *Evangelica Testificatio*, 1971, 39-40.

Another consequence of institutional frailty is the message of great uncertainty that we propagate about the future of our communities and even of consecrated life itself. We have to be clear that, while all formation is a workshop in which we prepare the future, we are also called on to propose a clear and viable form of life capable of a continuous process of growth. We must present a positive vision for the future, especially during the years of initial formation, not a life project under continual scrutiny and re-elaboration²⁴.

Therefore, seeing the phenomenon of departures in relation to certain situations of internal malaise in the consecrated life —many could be enumerated— should lead us to a genuine and humble view of ourselves, of our life, and of our mission rather than to a turning in on ourselves. Times of crisis like ours enable the action of God and of His Spirit to intensify, precisely because God's activity is quite invisible, weak, and foolish according to the world. These are times in which the primacy of salvation from God can shine with greater strength. They are times in which the need to put believing before doing can become more decisive! Our very frailty can be, paradoxically, a great help and guide, enabling us to reduce the importance of things that are not essential, so as to look intentionally beyond them, as the instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ* clearly affirms: “*The difficulties and the questioning which religious life is experiencing today can give rise to a new kairos, a time of grace. In these challenges lies hidden an authentic call of the Holy Spirit to rediscover the wealth and potentialities of this form of life*”²⁵.

2. Options for programs of ongoing and initial formation

The second part of my reflection follows the line I have just pointed out, that of helping us look beyond ourselves. Precisely because of that, I will not try to present a recipe for how to *prevent* departures and fragile, unmotivated vocations. I consider such an effort useless since departures and fragile, unmotivated vocations will always be with us. My question, on the other hand, is this: What do our ongoing and initial formation programs need in order to guarantee dynamic, creative fidelity which responds to the authentic call of consecrated life in our times and which takes up the challenges with faith and clarity?

For convenience, I begin with three tiers of maturity: human, Christian and vocational. All three must be taken into account in any formative proposal. The distinction is more didactic than real; in any given person we always find the three integrated, almost “confused” one with the other. The document *Potissimum institutioni* affirms that “*the integral formation of a person has a physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual dimension*”²⁶. Let us look, then, at personal development towards full maturity including human, Christian and vocational dimensions²⁷.

When I speak of maturity, rather than considering it a final goal, I see it as a continuous succession of growth stages which entail the seeking of guidance, the progressive passage from one stage to another, as well as the integration of critical situations, which every normal person confronts during life.

²⁴ LESPINAY G., *Être formateur aujourd'hui. La formation à la vie religieuse*, Montreal 2002, 157-158.

²⁵ CICLESAL, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 2002, 13.

²⁶ CICLESAL, *Potissimum institutioni*, 1990, 34.

²⁷ cf. for what follows, G. Crea, *Gli altri e la formazione di sé*, Bologna 2005.

A fruitful dialogue between theology and the science of education can help to integrate the process of *formation towards maturity*. In practice, it is a process which necessitates the elaboration of a program of growth and human-Christian maturity to help consecrated persons make conscious operational choices with the help of clearly stated goals and content. Here I emphasise the importance of instruments known as the *personal plan* and *community plan*, understood dynamically as aids to *formation towards maturity*.

From this point of view, the religious finds him/herself in a state of “progress towards maturity” at each age and in each experience of life since “*life itself is in a permanent process of development. It does not remain stable, nor is the religious called and consecrated once and for all. The vocation from God and the consecration to Him continue throughout life, are capable of growth and deepening in ways which go beyond our understanding*”²⁸.

Understood in this way, maturity varies according to the age, the psychological structure and the culture of the person. It is always a goal which each one reaches in the time and space of his/her own life. It is understood as a task to be carried out in each stage of lifelong development; it is “*a particular way of being, of serving and of loving*”²⁹.

It is important to re-affirm the need to refine the dynamism of growth in a *communal and fraternal context* because community “*is, for everyone, the place and the natural setting of the process of growth, where all become co-responsible for the growth of others*”³⁰.

On the basis of this dynamic vision of *formation to maturity* we will be able to find a way to re-evaluate our formative programs and strengthen them, especially to favour the change of mindset from a static vision of fidelity to a creative and dynamic one.

2.1. The core of human maturity

In my opinion, programs of ongoing formation have to be better defined in order to be more capable of accompanying *formation to maturity*, especially in three areas: affectivity and relationships; the habit of constant and creative work; and the resolution of frustrations.

The area of affectivity and relationships must, undoubtedly, be nurtured carefully through a clear option for *inter-personal formation*. We do not form self-sufficient individuals, but people capable of being in relationships and of growing through them. In this area it will be important to accustom ourselves and others to *an auto-biographical method*: the reading of one’s own life story in a new way in order to open up the dark side of ourselves to new growth and to allow us to recognise signs of the presence and the call of God in our lives. The re-reading of one’s own life also leads to *auto-biographical formation*. The experiences which the individual has lived through or constructed for him/herself, is transformed into a “book” from which the person builds up him/herself by constantly adding new pages³¹, which make it possible to recognise favourable signs, moments of crisis, symptoms of difficulties, and gifts to develop.

²⁸ CICLASAL, *Essential elements of the doctrine of the Church on the religious life in the institutes dedicated to apostolic works*, 1883, 44.

²⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita consecrata*, 1996, 70.

³⁰ CICLASAL, *Fraternal life in community*, 1994, 43.

³¹ cf. DEMETRIO D., *Manuale di educazione degli adulti*, Bari 2003, 8.

The inability to undertake formation *on the basis* of life and *for* life often generates a crisis derived from the discovery of the unexplored parts of oneself which provoke fear and an incapacity to interpret events and situations of the past in a way geared toward the future. Crises of vocational perseverance also can arise from events which persons block from their consciousness. The result is that they do not succeed in integrating the various dimensions of their history with those of their deepest being. For them the path to departure becomes the way of least resistance.

The habit of constant and creative work seems a very important chapter in formation to maturity. A person expresses him/herself in the work of his/her hands, intelligence, and will. Work – manual as well as intellectual – shapes the person, reveals and helps him/her to mature. It allows the person to keep his/her feet on the ground and develops the capacity to stay in contact with reality. The person is also enabled to know his/her limitations better, to face and overcome difficulties and unexpected events, to acquire a sense of responsibility and of how to do one's own work in collaboration with that of others. The habit of work also forms to everyday perseverance, frequently hidden and often disappointing rather than gratifying. Our programs of formation, perhaps, do not take sufficient account of this dimension which, together with all the others, can help the person to grow in a more harmonious way and also to deal with the obstacles presented in the different stages of growth. Paul VI reminded us that: "*an essential aspect of your poverty is to bear witness to the human meaning of work which is carried out in liberty of spirit and restored to its true nature as the source of sustenance and of service*"³².

The resolution of frustrations is another very important aspect. From infancy, life reserves for each one of us experiences of our limits which question us, damage the personal and social image which we have of ourselves, impede us from having all we want, how we want it, etc. If frustrations are not recognised, named, confronted and re-worked, they become a real poison which prevents the person from facing up to certain passages through the different cycles of life.

Experiences of frustration are many in the course of the consecrated life. It suffices to name the areas of fraternal life in community, and of ministry. An insufficient or nonexistent resolution of frustrations lies unquestionably at the root of many crises and of many departures, especially after the first years of apostolic activity.

In this context I think it is important that formation, from the early years, be demanding—but not rigid— so that there may be a gradual integration of the Gospel call for radicalism, always with respect for the fundamental freedom of the person. Formation also has to be experiential, that is to say, it must progressively translate learnings into life. Besides, it has to take place in a climate of responsibility and freedom, aware that one is really free only if he/she assumes responsibility for developing his/her vocational project as a person and, in our case, as a consecrated person. Experience tells us that formation too preoccupied with the candidate's "feeling good," with a "hot-house" or an excessively "closed" development, does not help a person to face up to the difficulties proper to all human, Christian and religious growth.

2.2. The core of Christian maturity

The centrality of faith-experience, understood as a personal encounter with the Lord and as a living friendship with Him, is essential for the consecrated life. It is a step that can

³² PAUL VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, 1971, 20.

never be jumped over, an aspect which can never be ignored. In times like ours of poor transmission of the faith in the family and in the Christian community, it is important to give a lot of attention to true and authentic Christian initiation. So-called “conversions” which come after relatively short experience in the consecrated life increase the demand for sustained organic growth in the life of faith, especially with regard to the dimension of Church.

Here let me recall the fundamental pillars of faith-experience: obedient listening to the Word of God contained in Sacred Scripture, in life, and in others; the sacramental life, especially the Eucharist, celebrated, adored and lived; and Reconciliation as a privileged instrument for a profound encounter with oneself and with the saving love of God. Faced by the resurgence of certain partial “devotions,” which tend to detach the content of Christian faith from the great reference points, we must form candidates through a holistic experience of faith anchored in the fundamentals and lived in affective and effective communion with the Church. This is true because the Church is the place in which the faith is witnessed, announced, and received; it is the context where faith matures and grows.

If the reasons for departures or for a fragile sense of belonging can frequently be reduced to motives linked to affective and relational dimensions, we cannot deny that the poor personal internalisation of authentic experiences of faith strongly and decisively influences the choice of many to abandon the religious life. It is as if, on coming face to face with the inevitable and diverse difficulties of life, they have no ground beneath their feet. In that case, everything tumbles down. Faith, in contrast, gives support and motivation to remain faithful to the initial response to the divine call, allowing the human dimension to develop ever more in accord with God’s desire and plan as revealed in our history.

A strong awareness of one’s mission is another aspect of faith and must be deepened and fed during the whole formative process until it really becomes one’s own, thus avoiding the risk of a consecration overly confined to the needs and expectations of the individual. Paul VI reminded us: *“Religious, for their part, find in their consecrated life a privileged means of effective evangelisation. At the deepest level of their being they are caught up in the dynamism of the Church’s life, which is thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness. It is to this holiness that they bear witness. They embody the Church in her desire to give herself completely to the radical demands of the beatitudes. By their lives they are a sign of total availability to God, the Church and the brethren. As such they have a special importance in the context of the witness which, as we have said, is of prime importance in evangelisation”*³³.

The dimension of mission cannot be devalued or reduced to “mission experiences.” Insufficient maturity in this aspect can often lead to profound and worrisome crises in young and adult religious who must learn to confront the complexity of the present-day world in which they are to embody the pastoral activity of the Church, to which they will make their specific contribution.

The dimension of mission will help us consecrated people to live a gradual transformation, to have “a watchful and critical attitude”³⁴ towards the problems of the present-day world. In this way it will change us into effective questioners of present-day

³³ PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 1974, 69.

³⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita consecrata*, 1996, 98.

culture and make us capable of fruitful dialogue with it. It will not be possible to avoid many crises without training to mission. For dialogue with culture, I consider it essential, as I pointed out earlier, to acquire an intellectual formation adapted to today's demands in order to help religious, especially young ones, to confirm their choice of vocation and to introduce the Gospel into the heart of present-day culture.

2.3. The core of vocational maturity

I have already recalled the need to cultivate a dynamic vision of the charismatic identity of the consecrated life in order to support creative fidelity. The perspective of *formation to maturity* further confirms this vision. With these premises it is possible to affirm that holistic formation, which takes in a broad horizon, helps to accompany consecrated persons on the journey towards a life project open to the future and capable of sustaining and nourishing fidelity.

In this context, I will refer to three points which I consider to be of particular importance: educating to stability and to change; giving a vision for the future and nourishing hope; situating the consecrated life firmly in the world and in history.

Educating to stability and change may appear to be a contradiction. We live in times of rapid and continuous change and we have a flexible idea of the person going through distinct phases of life. These two facts could put us at risk in formation of creating the expectation that it will be possible “to change coats” or options whenever one pleases or when things do not turn out as planned, that such changes are a normal part of a life desirous of being authentic. Perhaps this mentality influences us more than we think. The alternative is not, however, to educate people to be “impenetrable or indestructible,” but rather to educate them to be capable of remaining solid and unwavering about what is essential while at the same time being in a continuous process of development and growth.

Neither human nor vocational maturity is a fixed state achieved once and for all. Both involve a dynamic balance of all the components of our personality which keep us psychologically healthy and morally creative in our choices and open to growth and change each time reality or our personal goals demand it. Sustaining a process like this will help us to face in a more creative way the inevitable crises of stability and phases of transition. The document *Potissimum institutioni* clearly reminds us: “*on-going formation assists a religious in integrating creativity within fidelity. This is because a Christian and religious vocation demands dynamic growth and fidelity... This in turn demands spiritual formation which produces inner unity, but which is also flexible and attentive to the daily events in one's personal life and in the life of the world*”³⁵.

Giving a vision for the future and nourishing hope: This is a demanding goal in these days when it seems easier to close in on self, when having hope is sometimes equivalent to suicide! Formation to the consecrated life in its different stages cannot on the one hand hide the difficulties it faces or the situation it is dealing with. But neither can it, on the other hand, broadcast negative feelings by a tendency to interpret everything as a problem, as a result of lack of motivation or of a state of hopelessness³⁶. Interpreting the crisis in this negative way would inevitably lead young and old to lose the sense that the consecrated life has a future and

³⁵ CICLASAL, *Potissimum institutioni*, 1990, 67.

³⁶ cf. CICLASAL, *Starting afresh from Christ*, 2002, 12.

also to lose hope in an ideal —a word which is out of fashion!— an ideal worth the sacrifice of one's life and worth perseverance *during* trials. Even when we do not know *how* and *when*, we know that the Spirit is impelling us towards the future³⁷, and so we know that there are reasons for continuing to look forward, reasons for continuing to row “out into the deep.”

Situating the consecrated life firmly in the world and in history: When it accepts to stay within history and not on its fringes, especially in “abandoned cloisters,” the consecrated life permits us to find new energy for spirituality in our life³⁸. In this way it is transformed into something that is more evangelically attractive. Our reason for remaining religious is also solidified. Indeed, a consecrated life which does not engage with the great questions and challenges of present-day mankind would be a “cracked cistern” or a well from which it would be impossible to draw the water that gives meaning to the life of faith, for which there is so much thirst at the present time.

Forming to the consecrated life today can only mean educating to permanence the men and women of today, who are interested in everything that is human. That is so because formation means revealing the evangelical difference between the Gospel of the Cross and worldliness, precisely through sharing and being compassionate. I am particularly thinking of the importance of the topic of dialogue and of the difficulty of its practice at the present historical moment. As religious, we cannot feel exempt from this task. Only openness to dialogue makes the religious life less concentrated on itself and its problems, and very much more “attentive” to the other³⁹.

Faced with the temptation to live a consecrated life turned in on itself, far removed from the everyday world of people, or to search outside for the richness of relationships and of life which seems lacking within, we have to form to a consecrated life which takes nourishment from an incarnate spirituality, one capable of showing the world that the encounter with Jesus makes us more human through our alternative way of life made fruitful by the generous practice of the evangelical counsels.

Conclusion

From all that has been said, and simply as a way of summarising, I now wish to present some convictions which I consider important for forming to fullness of life and therefore for preventing departures as far as possible.

- The phenomenon of departures must help the entire Order or Institute and especially the local community or fraternity to reflect quietly and seriously. This reflection could well revolve around two fundamental questions: Why does a brother or sister leave? Why do we remain and how do we live the discipleship of Christ?
- This reflection should help us to discern means which would best shorten the distance between what we propose in documents and what we live in reality.
- I consider it fundamental, in this context, to give priority to on-going formation because it is the *humus* of initial formation. One is formed or deformed through “contagion,” from which stems the need for the whole fraternity or community to become aware that it is an agent of formation and to do all it can to be so. This will not be possible without making a clear and concrete option for on-going formation.

³⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 1996, 110.

³⁸ cf. MACCISE Camilo, «*Non ai margini ma dentro la storia*» in *Testimoni* 9/2004, 8.

³⁹ cf. CIARDI Fabio, «*Ruolo della Vita consacrata in Europa oggi come ieri*» in *Testimoni* 11/2004, 26-27.

- Make it possible for initial and on-going formation —especially the latter in the first years after solemn/perpetual profession or priestly ordination— to develop in a climate of responsibility and freedom, of familiarity in which it is possible to develop deep communication about activities, thoughts and feelings.
- On-going and initial formation have to help the consecrated to be persons in relationship, capable of offering and giving cooperation, capable of sharing.
- On-going and initial formation can never forget some fundamental principles: to be integral, personalised, on-going, progressive, gradual and accompanied. While respecting these principles, formation has to radiate passion for Christ and for humanity. All this will help, undoubtedly, to seek fullness of life and to maintain fidelity.

I wished to offer some thoughts with the aim of reconsidering and evaluating what we do for on-going and initial formation. They are guidelines for starting assessment and dialogue which will later help us to clarify how we can live today's phenomenon of departures in a creative instead of a passive manner, almost like victims. Departures make us uneasy, challenge us, and energise us to respond with greater fidelity to the gift we received.

Only if we take up with renewed energy the call to a consecrated life which is truly evangelical and truly prophetic for our times will we be able to motivate to our brothers and sisters —and ourselves— to continue living out today our discipleship of the Lord through an obedient, poor and chaste life.

The human person will always be a mystery. We will never be able to discover an infallible formula for avoiding crises and painful decisions, but we can certainly accompany others in a journey toward truth and freedom so that the following of the Lord Jesus will not be devalued into a superficial glaze far removed from our deepest inner being, but instead will continue to be the principle and the ultimate reason for our hope, enabling us to repeat with trust and love: "*if we hold firm, then we shall reign with Him*" (2Tim 1, 12).

REPORT OF THE WORKING GROUPS

Francesco Bravi, OFM

1. Introduction

The second objective of this meeting of the Union of Superiors General was to identify some processes and concrete means to employ in promoting an initiation into vocational fidelity in initial formation and for a fidelity that is creative and dynamic for on-going formation. Vocational fidelity comes into play once the definitive choice in favor of the consecrated life has been made and therefore has to do with adults, but it also requires promotion from the beginning moments of the formation process. In this perspective we would like to present the major ideas that emerged from the rich discussion of the working groups that may be of help in continuing the reflection and evaluation in our particular institutes, together with the other contributions of the seminar.

2. Shared Reflections and Concerns

The various contributions of the working groups showed a convergence on reflections and concerns that every Institute needs to keep in mind in developing formation programs (both initial formation and on-going formation) in order to support a faithful and passionately lived consecrated life.

In this context we were reminded that is especially important to locate the discussion in the arena of *grace* since the theme has to do with fidelity. It is *by grace* that we are called to this life and it is by grace that we persevere in it. All this opens us to the fundamental attitude of *thanksgiving* for the on-going gift of God that opens us to the responsibility of living out this divine gift.

On the consequences of the responsibility involved with our response the reflections of the groups offered some important considerations. All formation is geared to be lived with a reference to *on-going formation*. Formation must be undertaken with a view to enable consecrated persons to open themselves to continual formation. In this sense the profound and reciprocal connection is seen in their gradual stages and their differences between initial formation and on-going formation. Formation is thus conceived as a life journey, a *habitus* to be learned, almost a way of being a consecrated person today. The formation process is a never ending journey.

Accompaniment is regarded as the principal means for personalizing the formative process. Accompaniment presupposes the formation of formators / accompaniers, able to journey by and with the confrere whom they accompany. It is necessary to distinguish between the various kinds of accompaniment possible: that which is specifically involved with formation; psychological; academic; and others.

The formator is called upon to undertake the delicate role of interpreting the charism for a given person and to promote its incarnation in the life and concrete history of the person they accompany. For an adequate preparation and a more fruitful work, the formator should learn to work as a member of a team with all of the Institute's formation personnel and with people from outside the community.

Formation needs both *structure and programming*. The goals and the description of each stage of formation ought to be clear and precise and seriously evaluated. First of all it is necessary to create *a consciousness of the need for formation* in our Institutes; a feeling of the real necessity of being constantly in formation.

The basic means for formation is the *local community* and the important role of the ordinary, daily living. It is the community's daily life that is the privileged place for on-going or initial formation; a place where a serious sharing of faith and personal experience ought to be possible and where mature relationships promote real communication in an atmosphere of trust, discovering anew the practice of fraternal correction. *The fraternal life* can become the instrument that helps the local community to grow in all of these dimensions while also being the instrument for favoring a real desire for constant improvement.

The animation and support of the *superior* is a fundamental importance, whether on the local, provincial or general level. These are the people who not only should plan the community's formational direction and adequately evaluate it, but they should support it with corresponding persons and resources. They themselves have need of formation and support to provide this service and fulfill this role. The role of animation of the superior is integrated and lived out in the work of a team and geared to helping all feel that they are responsible for and actively involved in a serious process of ongoing formation. The individual religious is always the main person responsible for his/her own formation. One of the tasks that it was though important for the superior to attend to on all levels (local, provincial and general) is to give voice and visibility to the fidelity that so many of the confreres are living out with passion and commitment.

Formation in the consecrated life and to continually form oneself in this life, means also to nourish an incarnated spirituality that promotes and cares for the quality *of intellectual formation and study*, as the means of understanding our world and constantly rediscovering it in a new way—part of our very vocation as consecrated persons.

What the speaker defined as *autobiographical apprenticeship*—the capacity to continually interpret one's story in the light of faith, is considered the best formational method to help go deeper and open up new paths of growth promoting the internalization of the values of the consecrated life.

3. Levels of Maturity

While conscious of the distinction presented among maturity that is human, Christian and vocational, one cannot neatly categorize the journey of an individual. In fact in the same person all three dimensions are always linked together, almost blending into each other—the reflection and discussion in the groups and the assembly showed a basic agreement on this reality.

The maturity of an individual is continually unfolding in stages of growth that involve a work of progressive orientation and resourcing in going from one stage to another—even through the integration of crisis moments that someone normally deals with in his/her own life. In this dynamic view of formation for maturity, the three basic aspects of maturity—human, Christian and vocational—were discussed and emphasized differently by the working groups in speaking about both on-going and initial formation.

In speaking of the basic aspect of *human maturity*, special attention to affectivity and modes of relating to others was strongly emphasized. Knowledge of one's own personality was considered an important means of a real and deep communion with confreres and an indispensable premise for a serious journey of faith. A positive attitude toward manual labor allows the individual to remain in contact with the reality of life and to evaluate himself to better share life with others. The ability to express frustration was considered a necessity for an accurate self image. In addition to these reflections, other important qualities arose from the conversations the working groups. The ability to challenge oneself seriously in a sober and serious way over matters of life; the importance of recognizing, discerning, and orienting desires; formation for positively handling loneliness and the rediscovery of silence.

The centrality of the experience of faith, understood as a personal encounter with the Lord and a vibrant and deep friendship with him is essential for the consecrated life; this is the crucial criterion for evaluating the depth of Christian maturity in the life of every consecrated person at every moment. In order to grow in this relationship there is a need for a real and in depth formation in the spiritual life and for prepared spiritual guides who are able to facilitate this experience. Retreats, spiritual exercises, spiritual direction are all means of promoting this journey. Nevertheless an integral experience of the faith is necessary: one that is rooted in the Word, the sacraments and in communion with the Church. A mature faith will also include a significant missionary consciousness, nourished and sustained throughout the formation process in order to avoid a closing in or narrowing of expectations and desires, whether individual or communal.

Concerning the basic aspect of *vocational maturity* in addition to the points raised by the talk: to promote "stability of choice" while constantly being open to change, offering perspectives of the future nourishing hope and the ability to live the consecrated life in a way that is not parallel to but within human life and experience. A serious vocational maturity is measured by: a formation in view of a healthy balance between work and all the other aspects of our life; by the ability to learn to live in an international multicultural community; by being concretely formed to make one's own the goals and projects of the community; by actualizing the mission of the institute through attentive listening to confreres of all ages; by continually purifying our motives—the reason why I entered is not necessarily the reason why I remain in the institute.

4. On-going Formation and Initial Formation

Being conscious that on-going and initial formation are interrelated and belong to one, unique and gradual process with different steps, the discussions indicated that there were some points that needed to be kept in mind that go beyond what was said in the previous paragraphs.

For *on-going formation* it was emphasized that it was important to attend to the various stages of life and ministry through which the confreres pass so that a formation program might really involve them in depth. In this context, the importance of attending to confreres in the first stages of perpetual profession and priestly ordination was underlined. Ongoing formation first of all takes place in the ordinary and daily life of the community, but special intense moments or periods outside of the ordinary are also necessary, such as the possibility of participating in programs outside of the local community and institute.

A pastoral experience that is evaluated and supervised may be a good means for on-going formation. There is a need to make community meetings more dynamic in order to develop real in depth communication. On-going formation ought to help move the religious to a renewal of his/her personal mission and to embrace the renewed mission of their local community and Institute. A true and serious on-going formation promotes and nourishes personal creativity that, precisely because it is genuine, promotes the construction of community where communication is not only functional, but deep and where there is real sharing. In on-going formation, the importance of the animating role of the superior at all levels was emphasized as the one who guides each religious and supports him/her with adequate choices.

Regarding *initial formation* the importance of the formative community and its members was emphasized; in this community all are formators by the witness of their lives, by their presence and their way of living the charism of the institute. The formation of formators was underlined for the various stages of initial formation in view of personalizing these moments.

The formation process ought to be more personalized; this requires a serious and profound reflection all the stages and their duration presently required by our formation programs. In this context some propose that there be a break from the formational journey by requiring a series of supervised work and/or missionary experiences. Inter-congregational collaboration in the field of initial formation is a welcome challenge and offers an opportunity that should be seriously considered and which could open up new possibilities.

Initial formation should promote a maturity in the candidates that helps them to realize that formation is not about reaching certain formational stages, but is a dynamic process for one's whole life. A particular attention was given to criteria for vocational discernment and for the consequent stages in formation (postulancy, novitiate, temporary profession, perpetual profession).

A true faith formation demands a progressive ability to share one's own experiences and an ever deeper internalization of the faith and its witness to others in a balanced way that avoids false intimacy and devotionism.

It is necessary to attend to the developments in formation happening in the centers of philosophy and theology where the temporary professed are studying, especially in those places that do not belong to the Institute, so that there not be a dissonance between what they are learning and the formation policies of the institute.

The ability to work out one's frustrations was thought important for initial formation. If frustrations are not recognized, called by name, challenged and worked out, they become a real poison that does not allow the individual to deal with the specific phases in their lives and runs the risks of becoming a person who is not psychologically or religiously mature.

RATIO FORMATIONIS

Oblates of Mary Immaculate

Paolo Archiati, OMI

First question

The Ratio formationis of my Institute, in relation with the initial and ongoing formation, what sort of anthropology does it reflect?

To answer this first question it's necessary to specify what sort of anthropology we want to speak about.

If it is about a cultural anthropology, I would say that it is nearly impossible to answer this first question, because the young people to whom our formative work is addressed, vary from one corner of the world to the other, making it impossible to speak of only one anthropology. Within the single Asian continent, can we say for example, that the young men of India, Japan and Philippines agree on the same human and religious values? From this point of view, our *Ratio formationis* risks to address itself to youngsters who don't exist or that are merely the youth of the western or northern world or from another part of the planet.

But if we speak of a general or universal anthropology, we could then try to formulate a definition: not only could we say, in a quite generic way, that it is about a Christian anthropology, that is to say founded on the Christian values inspired by the gospel, but we could even speak of a communal anthropology centered on the person of our candidates.

It remains nevertheless true that the young for which these norms have been written change quickly, following the changes of the world that always have some quick and remarkable repercussions in the Church. Inside our Institute we therefore try our best to adapt these norms to the different contexts in which we work. That is why they don't go too much in details.

These exploratory considerations illuminate my sharing about the *Ratio formationis* in the Community of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) and the reflections that follow. I quote, with some adaptations, the printed text of our general norms.

Our *Ratio formationis* (General Norms of the Oblate Formation) addresses youngsters who made a first important choice in their life, a choice that has multiple implications: this choice consists in putting their life at the service of God and Jesus Christ in the religious consecration, in the missionary perspective of giving themselves to the poor.

I would like to underline two dimensions that characterize two essential aspects of the formation in our Institute.

The personal dimension

Oblate formation is centered on the person and respects the experience of the one who has been called. One of its main goals, especially in the initial phase, consists in helping him to internalize his personal experience, to know himself in the different dimensions of his being, positive and negative, to accept himself and to integrate and manage those experiences that in

a special way become an obstacle to his progress and his progressive growth.

The goal of our formation is to train men who enjoy interior stability and a wanted maturity; which means men able to integrate the content of their studies and the reflection undertaken on their personal experience. All the dimensions of formation: human, intellectual and spiritual, are clearly linked to contribute to the personality's unification.

Every person, with his own cultural values, deserves the highest respect. Our formation is based on the recognition of the true value of every person and every culture; this brings the person to healthily evaluate himself as well as his culture in light of the gospel, to open up to the richness of the other, people and cultures, to become aware of their multiplicity and variety, and to recognize their importance for his missionary engagement.

Every generation has its own experience. A more aged generation, for example, will discover things that are taken for granted by a younger generation: in this case formators should abstain from projecting their own experience, with its particular difficulties, on the new generations. On the other side, a younger generation won't be able to identify with traditions that appear out of date and distant from the real life. In this case, formation should assume the shape of an open and sincere dialogue to discover and to discern together, formators and youngsters in formation, the values and the different manners to live them.

An aspect of the human formation that acquires today an increasing importance, especially in some parts of the world, and that seems to ask for some deepening, is the aspect of affectivity. We live in a changing world with new awareness in the field of human affectivity and sexual behaviour. That is why during the initial formation, and maybe already during the period that precedes the first engagement in the religious life, formators are called to initiate and to pursue a dialogue concerning intimacy, solitude, friendship, etc., especially because these aspects affect community life and formation to a life of celibacy.

In the process of personal and communal development find their place some precious instruments of work, among which the psychological methods: without replacing other methods, which are always necessary, they can bring a remarkable contribution to the growth and to the progress of our young, teaching techniques of assessment of the person and of the community to which he belongs.

The communal dimension

For us formation is also a communal process. *"To every stage, so expresses itself our text, it is necessary to keep living the communal and ecclesiastic dimension of vocation. The insistence on this aspect doesn't decrease at all the person's value; on the contrary, it guarantees the full human, social and spiritual development".*

An aspect to which it is necessary to pay attention, especially in some Regions of the world, is that an authentic religious community is not at all a shelter (hiding place) for weak personalities. The young that knocks at our door should learn to be fully oneself, capable to stand up, if he wants to collaborate in the construction of a real community. It is necessary therefore that the members in formation know how to take their personal responsibilities; otherwise the community could not exercise its formative function and people would not be capable to live the life and the mission of the Institute.

The local community is the place in which each one is called to grow, through the mutual support, the sharing, the emulation and every other dynamic of the common life. The religious community permits, in its own way, to integrate the network of relations in which constructs itself all human life: relations of family, study, apostolate, leisure, etc. The formative community, situated in a network of communication with other communities, progressively prepares its members to become active community men and builders of community.

These affirmations say what our convictions are concerning formation and the key points of a formation that wants to be holistic, taking into consideration the different dimension of the person: physical, moral, emotional, intellectual. The spiritual dimension of the formation of our candidates is not reduced because of these aspects, on the contrary, it presupposes them.

Second question

What are the fundamental cores that govern formation in my Institute and help to strengthen the fidelity of its members?

I will limit my answer to three sets of values that are at the heart of formation in our Institute and that can be considered like pillars on which we help our youngsters to build their life. It is only a draft of an answer, just to orient the reflection and the sharing.

A first set of values concerns the human person, these are the fundamental human values without which the person is dangerously handicapped in his humanity: I would underline here the values of truth (with all its consequences as sincerity, openness, frankness, honesty, etc.) and the sense of the other, that includes the capacity to establish healthy and mature relations with the others (without overwhelming them or depending on someone). Linked to this value I would add the one of justice, of sharing, etc.

A second set of values concerns the person's spirituality: his faith, his choice of God and the values of Kingdom, the *sensus Ecclesiae* and the consciousness of working to her mission, etc.

A third set of values concerns his belonging to an Institute inside the Church: internationalization of a charism and its values, sense of belonging, desire to assume the mission of the Institute, openness and fraternity with the other members of the same family, capacity to think, to share and to work together, etc.

RATIO FORMATIONIS

Comboni Missionaries

Girolamo Miante, MCCI

During the past years, the Comboni Missionary Institute has been making a deep reflection and evaluation of the formation journey of its young candidates to the missionary life.

- The event of Comboni “saint” (his canonisation) has challenged us to discern in a deeper way the gift that was granted us. It enabled us to take up with courage and creativity the challenges of a renewed mission for the coming of the Kingdom in our present time.
- The Mission is at the core of today’s Comboni life: we are all involved in a journey of reflection and of looking in a new perspective at the experience we have gone through in order to jointly arrive at the best way to express faithfulness to our vocation by a process we call “Ratio Missionis”.
- Sociological and cultural changes are taking place everywhere and which have a deep impact on the young people’s concrete situations in this post-modern era. We are called to pay particular attention to the prospective of a new vocational geography.
- Lights and shadows are alternating within the context of the global situation in the world, the Church and the Comboni Missionary Institute: these are provocations that require “a penetrating gaze and a great heart” to take up the challenges of the third millennium as a time of grace and new missionary passion.

Faced by the complexity of the challenges, some basic norms have been used as guidelines for our formation journey:

The most underlined dimension is the attention to the person, understood as a personalised formation journey; need to interiorise the proposed values as well as the inculturation of formation. The active role of the person in formation, as the protagonist, has been rediscovered.

The method adopted is that of integration, recognising in the person the importance of the various dimensions which go to make up his richness and have to grow simultaneously and harmoniously: the spiritual, human, psychological and cultural.

The anthropological perspective we start off with is that of a free person, capable therefore of making decisions and of bettering himself, but at the same time one who has been wounded by what Scripture calls “sin”. There is tension, indeed, between sin and virtue. Not only. It is undeniably easy to realise that in our daily experience there is a certain tension between that which one deliberately chooses and tries to follow and that which, nevertheless, one constantly perceives as a need or attraction, even though it is in contrast with the asserted ideal, like when one wishes to love in chastity, but finds himself attracted by possessive desire, or just simply by the need to feel loved, to receive attention, to experience intimacy.

The importance of such tension cannot be underestimated in the formation journey. We cannot limit ourselves to simply making known and explaining the ideal. We have to offer

the candidate the possibility to enter into contact with that tension that exists between the ideals and the needs mentioned above as well as to offer him, as far as possible, the means to learn how to overcome it by redirecting it towards the ideal. In this way, the aim of a journey leading to human and spiritual growth is auto-transcendence, the going beyond oneself in order to open up to God's love.

Scripture, in particular St. Paul (1 Th 5:23), describes the human person as a complex reality that includes the corporeal, psychic and spiritual dimension. The person, then, is made up of a body, soul and spirit. In each of the three dimensions – where each one is distinct from the other – we experience the particular tension we spoke of.

It is necessary that the person in formation is enlightened about the tension that exists between the values and the needs, so that he may learn, in the context of this dualism, to make those choices which will help him to overcome the stress in the light of transcendence, rather than by temporarily eliminating it through the gratification of one's needs.

The suggested strategy is that of finding a focal point for each stage of the formation process.

In the Postulancy, the emphasis is on human maturity: the aim is mainly that of purifying one's motivations and of better preparing the candidate to interiorise the values.

In the Novitiate, the emphasis is on Christian maturity and on a deep experience of God.

During the Scholasticate and CIF (for the Brothers), the emphasis is placed on Comboni missionary maturity and attention to mission.

The focusing or underlining of a particular dimension is not to be understood in the restrictive sense: the guiding principle is that of gradualness and continuity in a constant process of growth.

The proposed methodology is that of initiation. Formation is "to have an experience" of the values that are to be made one's own, by making them go from a cognitive sphere to one that is affective, namely experiential and involving the entire person in the process of assimilation. The pedagogical method of initiation is an effective method to attain what we have set as our aim. It is a process that allows the transmission of certain values through moments, rhythms, initiatives, questions...which help us in perceiving and interiorising, feeling and experimenting, experiencing and verifying what has been proposed.

In the evaluation of the journey that has been travelled there are, nevertheless, difficulties in integrating the orientation norms with life experience. In all humility and openness, we are well aware of a number of unresolved difficulties we have termed the "Achille's heel" of our formation journey:

- We are aware of a lack of "requirements" in the different stages of formation.
- The internalisation of values does not reach the heart and the life of people.
- There is a dichotomy between language and life.
- Gradualness and continuity in the formation journey are difficult to achieve and to make bear fruit.

- Even the structures, and not just the exterior ones, the programmes and the passing from one stage to the next need some rethinking in order to find new answers to today's historical situations.
- Formation and mission do not express unity in people's life: we feel the need of a unified journey where the human, Christian and Comboni growth finds in mission its "natural" expression in order to arrive at a clear and mature identity.
- Also we, as formators, feel the need to pay greater attention to our personal formation, so that we may first of all give witness by our own life, so that this may be an expression of the gift of self for the young people in formation.

Our reflection continues even now so that we may learn how to harmonise directives and reality for a formation programme that provides an answer to present day's challenges. Some basic principles have been taken as guidelines: they represent that which is fundamental for our faithfulness.

* The first can be summarised thus: *Attention to the person*. This implies interaction between the responsibility of the candidates and the providing, by the Institute, of skills and ways for a personal and community accompaniment.

* It is followed by a second important point: *Mission*. It is the central reference point in order to offer to all a journey of radicalism and total commitment, the giving of self and faithfulness.

* Mission and attention to the person find in the assimilation and personal experience of basic values, a must for all, the concrete way of fulfilling one's missionary vocation:

- to take up a *habitus* of a spiritual life that is characterised by daily discipline (sacramental life, personal and community prayer);
- faithfulness and commitment in making one's own the values of consecration (for the Brothers it is important to deepen what concerns the laity consecration);
- to be in a process of constant conversion;
- assimilation of the formation journey through responsibility and transparency;
- capability of relating to others, shown by an active and faithful participation in community life;
- collaboration and openness to interculturalisation;
- sense of belonging to the Comboni Family (Comboni dimension);
- love of ministry, capability of service and passion for the difficult mission (to be like Comboni);
- willingness to make common cause with the poor.

The interiorised values become the MOTIVATIONS that support one's life. For this reason we make an effort to insert in the formation journey a period of experience for a fruitful integration of values, motivations and practical missionary life.

* A further important point for faithfulness is that of making ever more one's own the Founder's experience: a living encounter with St. Daniel Comboni, witness of holiness and master of mission.

In him we are rooted to a deep sense of God who gives meaning to our life.

We live the joy of total commitment, sharing the liberating strength of the Gospel with the crucified of history: making common cause with them. As intercultural communities of faith and love, we bear witness to the reconciliation that comes from the Lord: to be a cenacle of apostles.

* And, again, the importance of formators who have been prepared and are identified with their vocation: it constitutes the central core which day after day becomes like a mediation by which faithfulness may continue to grow.

RATIO FORMATIONIS

Brothers of the Christian Schools

Juan Pablo Martín, FSC

Introduction

The Institute's *Guide for Formation* (1991) is the common document that guides the "ratio formationis" in different Districts.

In practice, we do not have a uniform "ratio." But in the *Guide for Formation* the common elements that facilitate dialogue among all are spelled out to build unity in diversity, the basic elements that assure quality and a common charismatic vision.

I. What type of anthropology is reflected in our Ration Formationis (Guide for Formation)?

- a) A Christian, philosophical anthropology: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, true man, is the measure of the view of mankind that guides the *Guide for Formation*.
- b) A teaching anthropology, in that it considers human beings to be teachable.

As a Christian, philosophical anthropology:

a. Following Christ

- Following Christ, inspired in the Gospel as the "first and principal Rule" (n. 100).
- In initial formation, it has to do with becoming a new creature, modeled on the Beatitudes (n. 103).
- It is about encountering Jesus in one's own life "in dialogue, both existential and doctrinal, with the person of Jesus who calls and sends" (n. 106 - 107).

b. Emphasis on Scripture

- God, in relationship with humankind: Vocation is a call, a response, and an encounter with the God of persons. Vocation stories: Abraham (Genesis 12), Gideon (Judges 6), Samuel (1 Samuel 3), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1), Peter (Luke 5), Mary (Luke 1), Zacchaeus (Luke 19), Paul (Acts 9).
- God's call is also aimed at entire peoples and at communities of believers. The history of the chosen people of Israel, which is a history similar to that of every believer and of every community that struggles to respond faithfully to God.
- God summons prophets to reveal infidelity and to proclaim salvation and the reign of God.
- "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him (1 John 4: 9). This makes us his ministers to youth and inspires in us "the sprit of zeal for the salvation of souls."

As a teaching anthropology:

1. It is done in dialogue, it is open and transcendent.

- a) The model person is one who is attentive to God, who speaks from reality as read in the Word (99).
- b) A person who responds from the dynamic of fidelity to a given word, committed to others and to God.

2. It is personalized.

- a) Formation is based on personal responsibility and decision-making (9).
- b) He exercises self-knowledge, self-control and can support normal tensions (19).
- c) Personal discernment is key as is also the cultivation of a personal sense of interiority, especially as regards prayer.
- d) Personal mentoring is an essential tool throughout initial formation and its objective is to help the candidate in his personal life journey.

3. Community dimension

- a) The community makes possible the personal process in report with that of the Brothers.
- b) The person is involved in community dynamics.
- c) The candidate is prepared to respond, united in a common mission (40).

4. Integrated

- a) Formation strives to touch all dimensions of a person: the spiritual, social, affective...
- b) It always seeks "unifying behavior": integrating motivation and behavior, being and doing, based on the Institute's tradition of "making no distinction between your state of life and your employ," and of "acting always with your eyes set on God," "the spirit of faith" (32, 38).
- c) Re-reading the distance between who he is really and who he might like to be, between the real and the ideal, between weaknesses and qualities (120, 274).

5. A process

- a) Formation should be a positive and a narrative process for building one's own identity.
- b) An open identity, built up with creative responses. Re-creating the Gospel and the founding stories (101, 282).
- c) All of this is aided by an awareness of vital stages and moments of crisis and change.

6. Incarnational

- a) Awakening the sensitivity to situations of poverty of children and the young (103).
- b) Proximity of houses of formation to apostolic works and presence in the communities.

II. Fundamental kernels that support formation in the Institute and contribute to strengthen fidelity.

1. An awareness of participating in a collective Lasallian identity.

This collective identity is based on:

- i. reference to the "Gospel journey of the Founder and to the founding story,"
- ii. a sense of belonging founded on ties of relationship between persons and communities.
- iii. a sense of co-responsibility in Institute's mission.

2. Feeling called and gathered, with others, for the mission of Christian education of the poor. Making one's own the Founder's life journey, who was deeply moved by the situation of abandonment among children of the artisans and the poor, and who discovered, in the light of faith, the Institute's mission.
3. The spirit of community: to live together in a fraternal community, to stay together and to be associated for the mission, willing to go where sent, and to do what is required by the ministry.
4. The work of integration of the different dimensions of the Brother's vocation. Specifically, the integration of consecration–mission, life of community–ministry, spirituality–commitment, contemplation–action.
5. Attention to vital stages the candidate is going through, so that problems that emerge in times of transition can be embraced as a possibility for growth.
6. A study plan, including a balanced approach to three areas:
 - a. Theological, catechetical, pedagogical studies.
 - b. Lasallian studies.
 - c. Professional studies that offer the competencies that are needed for the mission of the Institute and knowledge of young people and the world.
7. Interventions and teaching issues that are required for formation:
 - a. Accompaniment: personalized, community, and District.
 - b. Personal and community discernment.
 - c. Attention to personal stages of growth and development, as well as to initial and ongoing formation processes.
 - d. Growth in independence and freedom in order to take charge of one's own formation (Personal Life Program).
 - e. Participating in the life and mission of the Institute (Community Program and Educational Program).

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USG President

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FORMING FOR A FULL LIFE

IN ORDER TO AVOID DEPARTURES AND TO STRENGTHEN FIDELITY

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