

Integral Formation for Self-Transformation

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'Come and See' (Jn. 1:39). With these words Jesus initiates the men who sought to follow him, into a process that gradually transforms them as his disciples. Jesus does not offer them a blueprint or ready-made programme of formation. He proposes to them what he himself personally undergoes, a process of Self-Transformation (kenosis) from crib to cross. But this process is not based on any ideology, but is born out of the "ABBA" experience which is the source of his motivation and strength all through his life, from birth to death. All his options and decisions pertaining to his mission are discerned and subjected to his fundamental option: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (Jn. 4:34).

He makes them experientially go through a process of self-transformation (kenosis) of their attitudes, belief system, mind-set and behaviour. He also personally accompanies them in their journey. And while accompanying them he enlightens their minds and hearts with his Word. Secondly, he also helps them to develop a global vision of life based on his Gospel values like love, service, compassion, forgiveness, justice, peace, reconciliation, etc. Thirdly, he often confronts them when their belief system, attitudes, behaviour and mind-set is contrary to the Gospel way of life. Finally, he also prepares them for the future mission by consoling and strengthening them especially after his resurrection. In order to form them better for their future mission Jesus exposes his disciples to diverse socio-religious situations of his time. And this exposure takes place always within the overall context of Jesus' vision and mission as stated by him:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (LK.4:18-19).

1. Present Scenario Regarding Formation in India

During the last two decades or so, priestly and religious formation in India has undergone a lot of changes. There is a paradigm shift from the traditional understanding of *formation for mission* to *formation in mission*. As the document *Jesuit Formation in South Asia* speaks, the formation in mission, “... seeks the integration of life style, human development, spiritual growth, intellectual formation and participation in the struggles of the poor as they seek to build up a more just and humane society”. To this end there is a greater awareness among formators and superiors in India to gear the formation to preparing men and women who could be at the service of socio-economically marginalized groups e.g. dalits, tribals, women, unorganized labourers, illiterates, street children, prisoners, victims of AIDS, sex workers, refugees and displaced persons. There is also greater involvement among priests and religious in fighting for justice, human rights, gender equality, ecology, etc. The prophetic dimension of the mission of the Church in India is assuming greater significance today and this is being very much stressed in the formation programmes. While these issues have become part of the curriculum at all stages of priestly and religious formation in India, the focus is by and large on the content and not adequately on the process. There are also packages offered to the formees periodically in the course of various stages of formation by way of live-in experiences in the villages, slums, prisons, hospitals, taking part in dharnas, rallies, protest marches, etc. And these experiences do make an impact on the young men and women in formation. However, the question remains: how far these experiences are transformative attitudinally and behaviourally? Are these experiences perhaps seen as merely a novelty or a necessary evil to be gone through while in formation?

2. Psycho-Spiritual Prerequisites for Self-Transformation

Integral formation as a process of self-transformation does not happen by itself. It requires a conducive environment. The following prerequisites are of paramount importance if the environment has to facilitate the process of self-transformation.

2.1. Quest for God:

One of the essential qualities expected of a disciple is a burning inner desire to encounter the Lord. And in the Indian context a priest or religious will have credibility in the eyes of the people only if he or she comes across as being a man or woman of God. Unfortunately often the image we have is that of a good educator, social worker, etc. In recent years there is a trend in formation to overstress psychology to the detriment of a solid foundation in spirituality. Unless and until we are anchored in the mind and spirit of Christ, our lives as priests and religious will be empty and meaningless. And there can be no substitute for a life of faith and spirituality that is rooted in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate, Crucified and Risen. It is God-consciousness and God-realization that can bring about the desired self-transformation. Hence the importance of personal prayer, a lively sense of faith, active participation in the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, solitude and sense of the sacred.

2.2. Spirit of Generosity:

One thing remarkable in the disciples of Christ is that when Christ called them to follow him, it is often said in the Gospels that they left everything and immediately followed him. They had their limitations and weaknesses, but they had a spirit of generosity.

2.3. Apostolic Availability:

The disciple is one who is chosen to be with Christ in order to be sent out to build kingdom communities. This should permeate a candidate's mind all through the various stages of formation, the desire and zeal to be of service to others and the Church. It is not enough to

have a desire to become a priest or religious if the primary aim or intention is just to get ordained. The ordination or final vows are in view of our apostolic commitment to the mission of Christ.

2.4. Sound Motivation:

Motivation is a complex phenomenon affecting the choices and decisions an individual makes in his or her life. When it comes to the priestly or religious vocation, it is very difficult to assess the real intention of the candidate for joining a seminary or a Congregation. Nowadays quite a few candidates are influenced by parents to opt for the priesthood or religious life with the intention of getting a college education or to learn English language well with a view to improve their future prospects for employment. Sometimes there is also a career mentality among candidates. When the motivation is blatantly against values related to vocation one needs to be strict in the selection of candidates. When a candidate habitually manifests zeal and enthusiasm and is committed to pursue vocation and mission, it is a good sign of having a sound motivation.

2.5. Inner Freedom:

Vocation is a free gift of God. And the response to the call is also totally free. If the candidate suffers from fears, deep-seated inferiority due to a very low self-image, he or she will not have that inner disposition of freedom to make a serious option for the priesthood or religious life; and as a result will remain enslaved to an unhealed past or a utopian future.

These five prerequisites are most essential and as such are the solid pillars on which rests the foundation of entire priestly and religious formation. In order to acquire these essential characteristics, there is a need for an environment that is conducive for integral formation.

3. Environment for Integral Formation

The environment plays a very crucial role in the formation of a candidate. In any profession, be it the medicine, engineering, games, music, etc. one becomes a master of that particular discipline when he

or she imbibes the values and skills proper to that profession. Therefore it is very important for the superiors and formators to provide an apt atmosphere or environment for the candidates to internalize the values, attitudes and skills proper to the priestly or religious vocation. Many a time there is a wide gap between the ideals proposed and the means provided to live those ideals. Let me illustrate this point with some examples. The recently revised Charter of Priestly Formation For India by CCBI states:

“Seminary formation in India should discerningly draw upon India’s cultural and spiritual heritage.... Therefore, throughout his formation, the seminarian will be given opportunities to interact with and respond to Indian society with its scientific and modernizing thrust on the one hand, and the struggle of the masses for fundamental human dignity and justice on the other”.¹

But in reality most of our formation houses both in physical location and more so in mentality, are cut off from the lives of the ordinary people who are by and large the target groups of our mission in India. Do we really get inputs from the lives of the marginalized and the poor of India? The inputs, by way of interactions with the poor, the marginalized, the people of other faiths, workers, farmers, youth, etc. are minimal, and most of the time, are from the same type of people: Christians, priests and religious, people of one’s own caste, class and religion. Hence the environment plays a very important role in formation if it has to facilitate a process of self-transformation. Here are some of the parameters we need to keep in mind in order to make the formation relevant and effective.

3.1. Life in the Spirit: Self-Transformation as a process does not take place by itself. It needs a free and conscious orientation of one’s life which, in the context of the priestly and religious vocation, is in and through an intimate relationship with Christ. Hence there is a

¹ The CCBI Commission for Vocations, Seminaries, Clergy and Religious, *Charter of Priestly Formation for India*. Revised on the Basis of the Apostolic Visitation, 2004, no.3.1.7.

need for constant inputs from a lived faith and prayer life that can nourish one's vocation and motivate the person to follow Christ. The environment needs to provide suitable structures of silence, solitude, time for personal prayer, spiritual reading, examination of conscience, etc. as necessary means for growth in the life in Spirit.

3.2. Human Formation: Thanks to the insights offered by the human sciences, there is a greater awareness today in the Church about the importance of human formation as the foundation for priestly and religious formation. After all, grace is built on nature and in turn perfects the nature. It is through the human instrumentality of priests and religious that the values of Christ are shared and communicated to the people of God in various human situations. Realizing its importance, the Charter of Priestly Formation for India states:

“To be Christ-like, the seminarians will strive to be fully human: a leader of people, gentle and kind, open and ready to listen, cheerful and patient, honest and true to his word; a man of self-respect, sincerity and courage, constantly concerned for truth and justice, unafraid to take decisions and persevering in carrying them out” (3.2.1a).

Superiors and formators have a serious God-given responsibility to prepare men and women who are deeply human, capable of loving, honest, open and transparent, emotionally balanced, respectful of persons, gentle and kind in their approach to people, courteous in their manner of dealing, etc. The environment of formation should provide sufficient scope to cultivate these human qualities essential for the priests and religious of today.

3. 3. Formation: Human-Christian-Indian: Formation, to be integral, should be characterized by these three dimensions: .1. Human, 2. Christian, and 3. Indian at all stages of formation. At the initial stages prior to philosophy or Novitiate, the focus should be more on acquiring human and Christian culture. This is all the more necessary in the Indian context when the majority of our candidates come with emotionally crippling complexes due to fears, inferiority, sexual abuse, etc. Secondly, many of the candidates do not have a solid faith

foundation today and therefore, the formators have to inculcate basic Christian values and attitudes in the candidates. In other words, it is in the lived environment of a human and Christian culture that the vocation to the priesthood and the religious life gets deepened and strengthened. Along with the human and Christian cultures, formation to be contextualized should be rooted in our own culture. Sufficient attention should be given to develop a love and appreciation of our ancient traditions, religiosity, customs, music, art, literature, scriptures, etc. And the study of these should be part of our curriculum at all stages of formation. Particular attention should be given to incorporate in our liturgical celebrations, methods of prayer, celebrations of major religious and national festivals, those elements, which are typically Indian.

3.4. Selection of Candidates: In the light of what has been said in the sections 1 (life in the Spirit) and 2 (Human Formation) of this article, it is needless to say that a proper selection of candidates for the priesthood and religious life is of the utmost importance for the future of the Church and the Congregation. A diocese or a Congregation has a right to choose men and women who are capable of living in a healthy way the priestly or religious vocation. One may have a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, but sometimes the candidate may not be as yet ready to live happily one's vocation. Hence let there be a proper selection of candidates using the scientific tools offered by the human sciences so that the Church and the Congregation get priests and religious who are capable of loving and serving God's people.

3.5. Location: It is of great value to have the formation houses situated in close proximity to the target people. Constant interaction with people of target groups like the poor and the underprivileged, will hopefully influence, shape and mould the life-style, and mentality of both formators and formees alike. This can be clearly seen in the life and ministry of Jesus. He closely associated with the 'little ones', the poor of his time and therefore, he could speak with credibility and authority. And the apostolic community, as testified to in the Acts of Apostles, bore witness to this central dimension of Christianity being a religion of the minority and for the minority, not the numerical minority.

but a minority in the sense of being the 'anawim', to whom Christ addressed the first Beatitude: Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.

3.6. Size of the Group: For integral formation, the size of the group does matter. If the number of formees is small, then the chances are better that they get individual attention, can be accompanied regularly, and they get frequent chances to exercise their talents, develop certain skills, and have greater scope to become leaders with a sense of responsibility and accountability.

3.7. Qualified Formators: It goes without saying that the quality of formation is closely related to the quality of the formators. While the number of academically qualified staff has definitely increased considerably all over India. I have serious doubts as to their qualification as formators whom the young seminarians or religious can look up to as role models. There is a serious lacuna in this regard, and therefore the type of priests and religious, the products of modern day formation, lack that calibre or quality which people expect of us. Many of the priests and religious have serious emotional and personality problems due to which their ministry suffers considerably.

3.8. Accompaniment: The Charter of Priestly Formation for India, speaking of Growth in Freedom in no. 3.1.4., states:

“An integrated person is intellectually free and open to new values, new experiences, and new approaches to reality; he is emotionally free to relate to both women and men with openness, trust and love; and he is spiritually free to always seek, find and do the will of God... The emphasis will be, not merely on external conformity and uniform observance, but rather on inner motivation, self-discipline, personal responsibility and accountability.

The process of formation begins with a close accompaniment of the candidate. As his formation advances, accompaniment should take the form of greater dialogue and guidance, which will help him to shape his way of life”.

My experience as a formator for the past twenty-five years is that the accompaniment of the formees as given today is far from being adequate. Seeking help from a spiritual guide or a counsellor on a regular basis has not become part of our formation culture. Spiritual direction and counselling are seen as problem solving when there is a crisis in the life of a candidate. Many of the formees seek spiritual guidance as a ritual to be gone through as demanded by the seminary. In fact what helps the process of integration is an ongoing prayer and reflection supported by a personal discernment with the help of a guide who accompanies.

The human experiences that the candidates go through in their daily life provide rich data or material for integration. These experiences become occasions for growth provided there is an ongoing reflection and prayerful discernment of these with the help of a guide.

4. Professional Competence:

Ours is an era of specialization. And we are called to be specialists as leaders of the Christian community. We have to be academically and intellectually well qualified and competent in the area of our specialization. We ought to be well informed theologically and spiritually so as to speak with authority in the name of the Church and as spokespersons of the Church. We need to be well equipped with the modern tools of communication so that we can preach the Word of God effectively. Given the stresses of modern life that affect our families, the youth, the aged, etc. today's Christian leaders are often called to be spiritual advisors and counsellors. And therefore the priests and religious need to be equipped with basic skills in counselling and spiritual direction. Hence at all stages of formation we need to emphasize the need to become professionally competent persons as priests and religious, so as to be effective in the modern world.

5. Assessment and promotion of candidates:

Priesthood and religious life are the only professions where competence is not the criterion for placement in various ministries. There is a rather widespread belief among many priests and religious

that once a person feels that he or she has a vocation, no human agent has the right to stop the candidate from becoming a priest or religious. In every other profession one is called to prove one's competence to qualify for a job or promotion. As a result we turn out from our seminaries or religious houses men and women who are half-baked and mediocre, who feel in many ways incompetent to face the challenges posed by the society today. Therefore we need to carefully assess the suitability of the candidate at every stage of formation, clearly defining what is the profile of the candidate expected at the end of every stage of formation. Sometimes the formators and superiors are satisfied that their candidates are free from any serious personality problems. That is a rather negative criterion in assessing the person. What is very much required – and this need to be assessed at every stage of formation – is to ensure that the candidate manifests in his or her life on a regular basis those values and attitudes both Christian and human that are essential for priestly and religious life.

6. Formators' Team:

Given the complexities and challenges one faces in the formation ministry, no individual formator however competent he or she may be, will be able to respond to them adequately. It is therefore imperative that for all stages of formation, beginning with vocation promotion right up to ordination or final profession, formation ministry should always be a joint effort of qualified team members. The team approach in the selection and promotion of candidates can ensure greater objectivity and also fairness to the candidates. The team will also serve as a tremendous support in shouldering a rather delicate and serious responsibility as the formation ministry in today's context. The team members should be well chosen so that they are of one mind and heart when it comes to essentials of faith, morals, priesthood and religious vocation.

7. Graded Formation:

One of the important principles for integral formation is that the formation is graded. Graded formation must always take into account

the psycho-spiritual dispositions of the candidates in order that they are able to profit from the various experiences. The candidates, for example, at the initial stages of formation (Minor seminary or pre-Novitiate) may profit from taking part in the parish choir or visiting orphanages or homes for the aged. They may have an opportunity to interact with boys and girls of their age, which might have a formative value. The same ministries may not be quite challenging from the point of view of formation and growth for students of theology. On the other hand, ministries that have a justice or human rights slant may be more suited to a group of theologians or junior sisters than novices or minor seminarians.

Given the formative values of ministries, it is very important, to identify the type of ministries suitable for formees according to their age and stage of formation. It is not enough just to expose the formees to various types of ministries. The involvement in ministries becomes formative for the candidates when they are helped to reflect and pray upon the experiences: see how far they have been challenged and helped to grow in their vocation, faith life, values and attitudes, freedom and responsibility, emotional maturity, sexual maturity, leadership, simplicity of life style, the practical implications of the vows in concrete situations of life, etc.

The formation of priests and religious has always been a major concern for the Church. In fact bishops and superiors do give the top most priority to the formation of priests and religious, and therefore a heavy investment is being made in terms of personnel, time and money. The most precious years of one's youth are spent preparing for the ministry. The laity too have high expectations of their priests and religious, whom they still look up to for spiritual leadership more than anything else. It is therefore very necessary that we provide a suitable environment for the future priests and religious to form themselves in order to grow in the likeness of Christ, the Good Shepherd. This is beautifully summed up in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, of Pope John Paul II (no.43):

“The priest, who is called to be a ‘living image’ of Jesus Christ, Head and shepherd of the Church, should seek to reflect in himself, as far as possible the human perfection which shines forth in the Incarnate Son of God and which is reflected with particular liveliness in his attitudes toward others as we see narrated in the Gospels”.