

# Human Formation, The Foundation for Priestly Ministry

Fr. R.V. Mathias, Christ Hall Seminary, Karumathur - 625 514

## Introduction

“Treat me like an animal I shall behave like an animal; treat me with dignity, I shall behave with dignity”. Most of us know this saying, but when it comes to life, it is so difficult to translate it into action. This article is more of a musing on human formation, a subject dear to my heart, that deals with treating the young people in our seminaries with dignity, than a scientific paper. I confess, I am not a regular writer; Thanks to the invitation of the editors of Vaiharai, I have tried to put my thoughts and experiences together. I hope they will be of some use in your ministry as formators.

## A FEW EXAMPLES OF THE TYPE OF PRIESTS WE MEET:

“You will know the trees by their fruits” said Jesus Christ, our Guru and Master. When we observe our priests in our Dioceses and Religious Congregations, we can know how they were formed in the seminary/formation houses. *Of course, their family background is absolutely basic.*

### A. An effective priest:

The other day one of the respected and well-informed senior members of a parish community was happy to talk to me about his young and dynamic parish priest.

He said: “Father, after a long time we are blessed to have a priest of our own.

I asked him: “What do you mean by saying ‘priest of our own’?”

“Yes”, he said, “he expresses his love without any partiality to all; young and old, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, adults and children; spends time in our families; respects us by offering a seat when we go to see him; listens to us without giving quick solutions; above all he calls me fondly Appa; not only me but the elders ‘Appa’, Amma, Annan, akka as though in a large family. He is available to receive any one and listen to him/her and do his best to help us. He is simple and transparent in matters of finance. Through his authentic attitudes and actions he has owned us, and naturally we also own him”.

I cornered him saying: “It is fine that he is close to you and you feel comfortable with him because he calls you Appa, Amma etc..but is that enough for a priest of God in a parish?”

“What else you want Father”, he retorted a little violently; “he is kind and compassionate like Jesus Christ and impartial like him and available to wipe our tears; what more do you want Father; we are happy with him and trust him.”

I went further to ask him openly: “Sir, you have not said a word about his priestly ministry, such as the way he celebrates the Eucharist and other sacraments; and how effective in his preaching?”

“Our priest is not a theologian or an eloquent preacher like the neighbouring Parish priest; but he is a practical man who is able to preach short homilies of 10 to 15 minutes on Sundays with one lively message for us. On week days he preaches two to three minutes which is like a tonic for our life that day. Since we love and trust him whatever he does as a priest in the church we relish and he helps us to understand the love of God”.

“You know father”, he said, “only now I know how many young people are in our parish. Parish house is full of them involved in a number of activities. Our Parish Priest, guides them on the right path. On Saturdays he never misses to sit in the confessional for the sacrament of reconciliation. Believe me father, the number of

confessions are increasing week after week. He takes his night meal on that day practically at 11.00 pm. You know, he never misses the Anbiam meetings(SCC). The only problem with him is that he never eats on time as a result he suffers from ulcer!”

*B. An Efficient Priest:*

I know also the eloquent preacher, the neighbouring Parish priest of whom he spoke. He was indeed a fiery and convincing communicator of the Word of God. He can hold the crowd spellbound for 45 minutes. He is loud and clear in his message and communication and everyone will be hanging on his lips. Often he is invited to preach during novenas and other important events even out side the Diocese. A person in great demand. He knows to play the key-board very well and sings beautifully. But his parishioners who relate with him daily and know him pretty well, do not seem to have much regard for him except for a few admirers in his close circle. The general remark is: he is not what he preaches; he is not honest and we can't trust him.

Some priests who are smart like our “eloquent preacher” were young men of ambition in their seminary who were talented in various ways who nurtured their “Ego” with all the praise and glory they got from the staff and the other students for all their remarkable performances such as bright in studies, excellent in theatrical performances, good orator, melodious singer etc. It was generally accepted that such young men with many talents would turn out to be good priests. Their ego-centered attitudes were not that much questioned during their formation. Their goal in the seminary, was to become priests and make use of the talents for the ministry of God, but their concentration would be on self glorification, expecting/demanding appreciations and recognition from the people and the authorities. When they are given a transfer by the Bishop, they would argue that the Bishop ignored them without taking all their talents and calibre into consideration. They always speak about themselves and their achievements in superlative terms and try to impress the listener. They would always lack a deeper spirituality, needed for the pastoral ministry.

*C. A Ritualistic Priest:*

We find also quite a number of priests who are satisfied with the minimum. They often are satisfied with limiting their priestly ministry celebrating Mass and other sacraments, keeping a safe distance from the people. Any disturbance from the people will annoy them; they are more ritualistic in their approach. They are more preoccupied with projecting a good image to the people, with only fear, not to be caught by the people in matters of relationship with girls/women. They appear to be men of piety but often negative in their outlook, blaming the people of non participation in parish affairs and finances but they themselves will not go for house visiting nor sincerely participate in the joys and sorrows of his people. They will manage the parish with the help of a few “Yes men” under the guise of Parish Council etc, some among these are quite money minded and soaked in the culture of consumerism, seeking for chances to go abroad.

For this last category of priests, the goal of going to the seminary was to become a priest. Vocation to priesthood was an end in itself with a commitment to celebrate Mass and other sacraments and take care of the Christians and protect them from evil forces. They were obsessed with sin phobia and constantly created a guilt conscience in people. They never searched further as they were convinced that it was a goal in itself. They upheld a theology of individual salvation of soul, void of the communitarian and kingdom dimension, supported by some formators there. Such priests had a “take it easy” attitude when they were in the seminary. They were very pious people, often found in the chapel, going around with pious looks. They sometime would tell their smart companions: “Friend, take it easy, what is the use to study so hard and get good marks. Tomorrow both of us are going to be priests and do the same work; you think that you will get more holy spirit than me on the day of our ordination!”

I have mentioned here three types of priests. There may be others also. But my question is when all the seminarians in a particular seminary get the same type of formation, how is it possible that there

are so many varieties of priests with different understanding of priesthood?

**The role of the formators in the shaping of the thinking and attitudes of the seminarians:**

- The reason for the varieties, I think, is due to a lack of clear understanding among the formators/professors on the content and method of what they communicate to the student. They might hold on to a particular school of theology. There are formators who still hold on, even after Vatican II, to a pre-Trent understanding of Theology that upholds the dichotomy between body and soul; Spirit as sacred and matter as impure. The soul has to be saved from the flesh oriented tendencies of the body; only then one can attain eternal life. A formation, based on this concept will certainly produce priests who will be away from the people and who are satisfied with a ritualistic celebration of sacraments.

- There are other formators who are interested to initiate the students in all the modern communication skills for the purpose of proclaiming the word of God. Their aim is to make them experts in the field of communication. Some of them lack a sound theological base, as a result they end up forming the seminarians in skill development with a conflated Ego.

- There are a few others who have been well initiated in Vatican II and have learnt to see life in its totality and unity. They have gone deep into the Theology of incarnation and understand the unity of a human person in body and soul. They assert the dignity of the human person created in the image of God. Such formators reach out to those who search Truth and enrich them. The seminarians, as a result of this formation, come out as mature human beings with a transformative and liberative message of God. They are open, honest, truthful, God-centered and people-oriented, respect people of other religions, joyful, available, enjoy the kingdom vision and actions oriented towards building God's kingdom in their pastoral responsibility.

In my opinion the basic problem of formation lies with the formators! Understanding this need the Rectors of the Major Seminaries in India decided in their meeting held in Delhi, in 2006 “ *Choice and training of committed and competent formators* ” as one of the top priorities. They continue to say: “In the selection of the formators we need to pay attention to the adequate levels of their Spiritual quotient(SQ), Emotional quotients(EQ) and Intellectual quotient(IQ).” How it is important and imperative to select men and women who have, to a minimum extent, a unified vision with readiness to search and update themselves in this vision. We have no way of blaming our seminarians for not forming themselves in spite of our efforts to form them. The question is what is the content of our efforts and methods of formation?

### **LIFE GIVING RELATION AS THE FOUNDATION OF FORMATION**

The foundation of any formation lies in the quality of relation between two human beings. A quality relationship brings forth LIFE. The person of life will contain in himself authentic love, truth, compassion, joy, peace, hope and harmony. Such a person when s/he relates with another who is a “ walking-dead ” in the world helps to resurrect that person, infusing into him/her all that s/he lives, thus inspiring meaning and hope for the rest of his/her life.

In the present world filled with self-centeredness, a quality relationship is a rare commodity. Only people of great calibre and quality will be able to form others towards such a relationship.

In our ancient Indian culture, we have had, what we call, the *Gurukul* way of education. Students already in their younger age were brought to the Guru who was considered to be a man of quality. The students stayed with him for many years in order to willingly relate themselves with the Guru and learn from their experience with him, to become qualitative persons in the society. The Guru contained in himself the vital messages of love, compassion, justice, truth, joy peace and harmony which he transmitted to the students in slow dosage

and through long duration, like the monsoon rain, until all these became part and parcel of his life. Therefore the quality of the Guru is a vital factor to determine the formation of the students.

### **JESUS CHRIST GIVER OF FULLNESS OF LIFE THROUGH HIS HUMAN RELATIONS:**

Now let us go to discover a bit the person of Jesus Christ our great Guru and Master and the relationship his disciples had with him for three years. Jesus chose twelve disciples from simple and humble background for a purpose: "Then Jesus went up to the hill and called to himself the men he wanted. They came to him and he chose twelve, whom he named apostles. "I have chosen you to be with me" he told them, "I will also send you out to preach and you will have authority to drive out demons" (Mk 3: 13-15). Jesus Christ the faithful disciple of his Guru, his Father, contained in himself the life-giving elements. The fire of life of the Father was fully in him, for he was in the Father and the Father was in him.(Jn,14:10) It was with this experience He was able to say: "I have come in order that you might have life – life in all its fullness" (Jn 10:10).

The dynamic physical presence and life-giving relations of Jesus with everyone he encountered, resulted in their well-being at all levels, enjoying peace and harmony, except for those who were not ready to open themselves to his life-giving relationship; such as the Pharisees, scribes, and people in religious and political authorities. Right from his first life-giving relationship with the couple at Cana of Galilee till the last one, the healing-touch-relationship with the man who lost his ear to the sword of Peter in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus relationship was always life-giving. For example his relationship with Zacheus, woman caught in adultery, driving out of demons, giving life to Jairus daughter, his friend Lazar and so on.

The power of darkness and death could do nothing to this man of life-giving positive message and action, including his own death on the cross. His resurrection is a clear and logical message that LIFE promoting persons will never become the victims of death. Rendering

his life on the cross is the ultimate sign of unconditional life-giving relationship.

It is about this man Jesus Christ that St. Paul would say, "For the full content of divine nature lives in Christ, in his humanity and you have been given full life in union with him." Col 2: 9-10. "Christ is the visible sign of the invisible God" Col 1: 15.

It is this Jesus who "called to himself the men he wanted". In the Jewish tradition it was the disciple who chose his guru; sometimes he had to pay a heavy sum to get a renowned Guru. St. Paul should have chosen the great master Gamaliel this way.

Here it was the Guru Jesus who chose whom he wanted. He chose them not to give classes like the learned Pharisees on Torah to their disciples, but he called them simply "to be with him". The disciples asked "Lord where do you live"? Jesus said "come and see"(Jh. 1:38b-39a). *This life-giving relational presence of Jesus slowly got transmitted to the disciples through a constant interactive relations with mutual trust and that became part and parcel of their lives in spite of the great difficulties they encountered to transcend the dividing world's categories for successful relationship!!* such as "who among them is the greatest", Peter rebuking Jesus not to talk about his sufferings and death in Jerusalem. The twelve were like cold iron rods now placed in the heart of a burning furnace called Jesus. Slowly they inherited the entire quality of that life emitting fire.

In our theology we speak of the three fold functions of Jesus' priesthood: they are very much connected to the process of priestly formation viz: *Reigning, proclaiming and sanctifying*. This order proposed by us does not seem to correspond to the order established by the Master when he formed his disciples. His order, right from the beginning seems to be in the reverse:

- "Sanctifying". Being with him is being enveloped by the "Holy" and all that this "Holy" contains viz: Truth, compassion and

unconditional love, justice, harmony and peace. This holiness is the essential content of the Kingdom.

- It is in the process of forming them into his likeness he gave them the mission to go and preach. Again, the word preaching need not be understood in the context, only as mere verbal communication; but words that would carry in a dynamic way the essential content of the kingdom flowing from the first function, the life-giving relational experiences they had with Jesus. This is *proclamation*, the second function of Jesus' priesthood. As John one of the twelve later would say: "We write to you about the *word of life* which has existed from the very beginning. We have heard it, and we have seen it with our eyes; yes we have seen it, and our hands have touched it. When this life became visible, we saw it; so we speak of it and tell you about the eternal life which was with the Father and was made known to us. *What we have seen and heard we announce to you also.*" 1Jn, 1:1-4.

- Power to drive out demons, in the context, need not be taken as exorcism alone; it is rather, the Apostles were empowered to have dominion over the power of death and all its calamities in the life of an individual and that of the community, as their Master proved during his life time, in other words they were given the authority on all the life emptying and life destroying values of this world. This is the third function of Jesus' priesthood, namely: *Reigning*; the rule of God in the world. This is the way Jesus formed his twelve apostles and after his resurrection he sent them to preach this good news all over the world and *make disciples, in the same manner as he made them his disciples*. Disciples thus formed will be empowered by the Spirit to preach and drive out demons!

The content and method of Jesus Christ's formation of his disciples should be the foundation for forming the seminarians for their ministry

We are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in totally a different social context from that of Jesus Christ; Jesus never had a seminary as we have

now. He formed them in their natural milieu. He took them along with him wherever he went and made them hear him, see what he was doing. I wish that the Church leaders had a political will to adopt this method to form their seminarians to be authentic. But today we have seminaries with solid buildings and all that are necessary for the so called formation of our students. We have highly qualified professors; enough and more money to take care of all the needs of the staff and the students etc.

The basic question is: Does our formation adequately prepare our students for the mission of the kingdom of God, proclaimed by Jesus Christ? How much they are able to experience the divine mysteries of the kingdom by first deeply entering into his humanity. For Jesus' humanity is the revealer of the secret of God's kingdom.

“The whole work of priestly formation should be deprived of its foundation, if it lacked the necessary human formation” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV)). Paul Parathazham in his national survey on “Priestly Religious Formation in India Today” says: “Human formation which is the foundation of priestly formation is arguably the most neglected aspect of formation in India. We seem to be concentrating all our efforts on building a spiritual ‘superstructure’ without the human ‘base structure’, thus rendering the entire enterprise. Strenuous and futile. Every other aspect of formation, be it intellectual, spiritual or pastoral, is institutionalized in the seminaries with a specific programme, designated personnel and prescribed activities or exercises. But for human formation there is no such programme in place. It is largely taken for granted!!”

The major seminary Rectors, in their meeting in Delhi in 2006, being aware of this lacuna, have resolved thus: “We need to form a graded programme for human formation together with adequate tools for evaluation of human growth and maturity.

1. Graded courses in psycho-spirituality and affective maturity need to be incorporated.

2. Exposure to growth-promoting real life experiences will facilitate human growth.
3. Small group animation must be encouraged
4. Personal accompaniment by competent and trained formators is essential.

Such institutionalized approach to human formation would result in as the Charter says "to be Christ-like, the seminarian 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"(Charter 3.2.1.)

## **My Experience**

### ***As Chaplain of the Catholic Action Movements:***

At this juncture I would like to share some of my own experiences in the field of formation. In my 44 years of priestly life, I have spent at least 35 years in forming young people; earlier through the YCS/YSM and then as the Diocesan, National and International Chaplain of the Young Christian Workers' movement and also as chaplain of AICUF in the Trichy Region. *The basic principle of formation in all these movements is that the chaplain is just an adult companion to walk along with the youth/workers in their efforts to form themselves as effective leaders. The chaplains were facilitators. The young people made their own decisions through their own democratic structures.*

As an adult walking with them I had often the temptation to tell them that they were immature and what they were planning was not correct and that it would lead them to serious problems. But I learned slowly to respect their freedom and their right to decide for themselves. I kept silent but actively followed every step they made. Another important aspect of formation in the movement was periodical *review and evaluation* of their actions. Whenever they made decisions and

acted they would sit more often for review. It is at that time, I as the facilitator helped them to realize that they could have avoided the crisis if they had planned a bit differently.

This, my approach, the young people liked for the simple reason that they had their freedom to commit their own mistakes and learn from it with the facilitation of a concerned and caring facilitator without any compulsion or judgment. This way of being with them built a trust-filled relation between us. In the beginning of my work with the young people it was not easy at all to play the role of a facilitator because I thought that as a priest I had a leading role and the youngsters who are inexperienced and raw should listen to me and learn from me! In course of time I discovered that my attitude was not accepted by the matured leaders of the YCW movement and they challenged me. I had two options in front of me:

1. To quit the movement and look for a post in the church where I could have an audience ready to listen to me without any criticism and appreciate me, which would have given me plenty of satisfaction.

2. To continue to face the challenge in the movement and grow with the young people sacrificing "my priestly ego". I chose the second option and I did not regret for I have learnt more by being with the young people than what I have given. This has helped me to be a tolerably good animator/formator in my life.

I saw them growing in human maturity *in and through their involvement/ actions in the society: among the students' community or the world of workers*. They developed the habit of first listening to the other people in the group and respect their views; honesty, sincere involvement in carrying out decisions made by them in their meetings; reporting and being accountable during the time of review; sensitive to the needs of friends who work with them. Vision oriented actions with a spirit of solidarity; developing skills to analyze the society in order to shape a new society built on justice. They developed deep sense of

justice and a spirit of sacrifice for a common cause. The hundreds of young workers and students became in a way my Gurus.

*As the Rector of Christ Hall Seminary:*

It was this background of my own formation that gave me confidence to accept the responsibility to be the Rector of Christ Hall Seminary at Karumathur in the year 2004. Though I was open, loving and understanding most of the students looked at me with fear and some of them were even perspiring when I called them to my room for a friendly chat! This was a chance for me to understand the type of formation they were getting previously. The image of the Rector was an image of terror. They followed the rules and regulations more out of fear; the fear of being sent out of the seminary. The final report of the Rector to the Bishops was a nightmare for many. I had to tell them several times that their Bishops chose them and sent them here not to be sent out but to be formed in the image of Christ at all levels. It took more than 6 months for them to discover that I was an authentic person interested in their integral formation. The trust-building was not that easy.

Following the lessons that I have learnt from the YCW, I played the role of an active, caring and concerned animator. My talks were centered round the theme: The seminarians are the agents of their own formation. Self-formation will never be a reality in an atmosphere of fear and authoritative domination, concentrating more on the discipline than the person of the seminarian. An atmosphere of freedom accompanied with a sense of responsibility is a "*conditio sine qua non*" for an authentic integrated formation. In spite of some reactions from some of the formators, I continued to persist. It slowly resulted in creating, as the Rectors assert in their Delhi meeting: "*Creating a healthy environment for formation*":

1. Formation best takes place in a context of relationship, between staff and students, among students and the members of the staff

2. Basic necessities and infrastructures must be provided to create that atmosphere
3. As primary agents of their own formation, the students must be offered opportunities to exercise their freedom in decision making with responsibility to bear the consequences of their choices.
4. The seminary needs to provide various fora for healthy and free expressions of the seminarians' experiences and views.
5. The seminarians should be placed in life situations that promote growth in a contextualized environment.

I am glad to share that after three years of such experience, many young men in the seminary acted more in a matured way freely owning the discipline without compulsion. They had grown in fearless and trust-filled relation with the formators; they manifested interest to go for camps and Sunday village ministry. I am also glad to share that the staff members have grown in this spirit and show authentic interest to form our students in this direction.

### **Conclusion:**

What I have said so far, I consider as the foundation of human formation of our future priests. "A prudent system of training will therefore aim at developing in the students a proper degree of human maturity. This will be chiefly attested by a certain stability of character, the ability to make carefully weighed decisions, and a sound judgment of events and people. The students should learn self-control, develop strength of character, and in general value those good qualities which are esteemed by men and which make Christ's minister acceptable. Such qualities are sincerity, a constant love of justice, fidelity to one's promises, courtesy in deed, modesty and charity in speech" (*Optatam Totius*, 11).

"The priests of the new testament are, it is true by their vocation to ordination, set apart in some way, in the midst of the people of God, but this is not in order that they should be separated from the people or

from any man but that they should be completely consecrated to the task for which God chooses them. They could not be the servant of Christ unless they were witnesses and dispensers of a life other than that of this earth. On the other hand, they could be powerless to serve men if they remained aloof from their life and circumstances. (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 3).