

Formators as Role Models?

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Introduction

'Role Model' is an expression that is both poignant and challenging. At the outset it appears easy to understand. But in the deeper analysis it raises many questions. Can any one be a 'role model' to anybody in the fullest sense? Could anyone attain the required perfection in his life between the age of 30 and 40 to be a 'role model' to somebody else? Do not the formators have their own strengths and weaknesses, goodness and badness, whims and fancies? When the principles - each one is unique, nobody is perfect - are accepted, how come that somebody is asked to be a 'role model' to somebody else! The *Charter of Priestly Formation for India*, (hereafter *Charter*) states, "All priest-formators should be positive role models for seminarians."¹ Since the *Charter* insists on this aspect of 'role model' it becomes imperative to understand this expression in its proper sense. In this article I mainly deal about formators in seminaries. It is equally applicable to formators too.

The Role of Formators

In any formation house the formators play an indispensable role in the life of the formees. The effectiveness and the end result of priestly or religious formation depends to a large extent on the maturity and strength of personality of formators.² While the *Charter* speaks of three agents of formation, namely, the seminarian, the ordinary and the formators, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (hereafter *PDV*) lists five agents:

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.4.3.

² Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992, no.66.

the Church and the Bishop, the seminary as an educational community, the professors of theology, communities of origin and associations and youth movements, and the candidate himself.³ It is interesting to note that the *Charter* places the candidate first in the order while the *PDV* places him at the end. Another notable feature is that neither of them separately mentions Holy Spirit as one of the agents of formation but mentions him throughout. Basically we have three protagonists of formation: the Holy Spirit, the Candidate and the Formator.

Preparation for Priesthood or Religious life goes beyond human ability and talent. It is the work of God through the action of his sanctifying Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the guide and the author of the soul's sanctification. It is he who brings as his entourage the virtues and supernatural gifts through the action of his grace. He transforms the person to the extent the latter cooperates. That is why *PDV* rightly puts that the Holy Spirit is the "Agent *par excellence*"⁴ in the formation of the candidate. It is He who "by the gift of a new heart, configures and conforms him to Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd"⁵

The candidate is first and foremost a Christian. The most essential element in the preparation for priesthood is his personal sanctification through his efforts to identify himself with Christ. It is the sanctifying Spirit who enlightens the candidate's conscience to see the path along which he will acquire his priestly identity. Further, formation is a slow and laborious process with its times of light and darkness, its moments of joy and affliction. No one can better support and encourage from within the efforts of both the candidate and the formator than the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Holy Spirit is the first protagonist of formation.⁶

³ Ibid, no. 65-69.

⁴ Ibid, no.69.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ M. Maciel, *Integral Formation of Catholic Priests*, Alpha House, New York 1994, p.23.

The candidate must realize from the start that nobody will “form him” nor “make him” from without. There is no room for passivity, indifference or simply going along with the current in an established system of formation. The candidate must form himself. Since the first protagonist of formation is the Holy Spirit, the candidate must understand his personal work as working together with Him. He must allow the Holy Spirit to chisel, melt and mould him without putting any hurdle. It means that prayer, interior silence, attention to his inspirations and the candidate’s sincere and docile response to them are principal and integral elements of his efforts to form himself as a priest.⁷

It also means that, since God has wished to make use of human collaborators, the candidate’s attentiveness to the Holy Spirit logically has to be translated into attentiveness to the formators who will help him to know the goals, the tasks. It is here that the formator plays an important role. As the third protagonist, he should consider himself responsible for the formation, and grasp the importance of his mission for the Church. But it would be a mistake if he has to think himself as the only one responsible. He must remember that he is a co-operator, a co-worker, a helper of the Holy Spirit, and should act accordingly. The first concern of the formator is to be close to God and to be open to His Spirit. He must admit his own limitations and the enormous disproportion that exists between his possibilities and human resources.

The term “formator” must not deceive anyone. Clay pots are formed from the outside; a person is formed from within. The formator does not “form” but “helps” the formee to form himself. The success of the formator’s work lies in arousing the formee’s free initiative in such a way that the candidate takes the reins of his formation into his own hands and be open to the Holy Spirit and to the orientations of the formator.

⁷ Ibid, p.24.

Formators As Role Models?

Since the role played by the formator is very important it is evident that he must be an integral, intelligent and holistic person. In fact the skill as a formator hinges on his personality, maturity, spirituality, credibility, creativity, commitment, dedication and mission. Psychologists and sociologists would say that in any community or society each one is affected by the others either positively or negatively, either directly or indirectly. There will be always some who play a leading role and whose influence will be very great. If this principle is applied to the communities of formation, then we can say with certainty that formators do influence the formees in a stronger way than anyone else in the community.

Youth are easily attracted to film stars, politicians, musicians, religious leaders, etc. In the course of time this attraction develops into attachment which in turn makes them as followers of their 'Idol'.⁸ The youth do whatever their 'Idol' wants them to do. Even if the 'Idol' does not demand anything from them they voluntarily come forward to do anything that would please the 'Idol'. The 'Idol' has great impact and influence on the lives of his/her 'followers' and therefore, we find that the youth easily pick up the values, style, mannerisms and ideals of their 'Idol'. Such is the phenomenon seen in the secular world. The formees also belong to the same category of youth and hence it is natural that they are attracted to and influenced by someone in the community. Since the formators play a vital role in the community their impact and influence on them will be very great. That is the reason the Church documents insist that they should be exemplary and inspiring role models.

An empirical study on "Vocation and Formation of Priests and Religious in India" done by Fr. Paul Parathazham reveals that only "about one fifth of the respondents characterize most of the formators as *exemplary*; more than half feel that the term *exemplary* can be

⁸ By 'Idol' it is meant the person to whom the youth is attracted.

applied only to some or a few of their formators. ...A large number of respondents call into question the integrity, impartiality and competence of many, if not most, of their formators.”⁹ This is a sad situation. Hence, formators have to seriously think about their role and life. They are expected to excel above others in many ways and become positive role models.

It is because of this that *Optatam Totius* insists, “Seminary superiors and professors should therefore be chosen from the best and should receive a careful preparation in sound doctrine, suitable pastoral experience and special training in spirituality and teaching methods.”¹⁰ While stressing the same idea of *Optatam Totius*, *PDV* points out further the qualities demanded of the formators: “The task of formation of the candidates for priesthood requires not only a certain special preparation of those to whom this work is entrusted, one that is professional, pedagogical, spiritual, human and theological, but also a spirit of communion and of cooperating together to carry out the programme, so that the unity of the pastoral action of the seminary is always maintained under the leadership of the Rector. The body of formation personnel should witness to a *truly evangelical lifestyle* and total dedication to the Lord.”¹¹ Further it states “for this ministry, priests of exemplary life should be chosen, men with a number of qualities: human and spiritual maturity, pastoral experience, a capacity to work with others, serious preparation in those human sciences (psychology especially) which relate to their office, a knowledge of how to work in groups.”¹² The *Charter* also emphasizes the exemplariness required of them: “Formators should be *exemplary*

⁹ Paul V. Parathazham, *Vocation and Formation of Priests and Religious in India, An Empirical Study*, (Photocopied material given in the Vth All India level Rectors' Meeting held in Cochin, 22-26 Sept. 2005), pp.28-29, 38-39.

¹⁰ Vatican II, *Optatam Totius*, no.5; Cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no.66; Cf. *Charter*, no.4.4.1.

¹¹ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no.66.

¹² *Ibid.*

priests capable of communicating priestly ideals to the seminarians, not only by word but also by their life and pastoral experiences.”¹³

Due to the above mentioned qualities and characteristics demanded of the formators they are asked to be role models to the students. They must, therefore, constantly strive to be good role models. The question ‘can any one be a perfect role model?’ still remains unanswered. The *Charter* says that the formators should be ‘positive’ role models. It does not say that they should be ‘perfect’ role models. As imperfect human beings they can never be ‘perfect’ role models. The *Charter* is aware of this fact and hence instead of using the adjective ‘perfect’ it uses ‘positive’. Who is then the ‘perfect’ role model? It is none other than Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ: Role Model Par Excellence

We can point out many aspects in the life of Jesus to prove that he is the role model par excellence. But I would like to propose the ‘kenotic model’ of Jesus Christ as the supreme model both for the formators as well as for the formees. Taking into consideration our Indian context I believe that the kenotic model would be quite apt. Therefore, I make some reflections on the kenotic hymn of Phil 2: 6-11.

In the text of Phil 2: 6-11 St. Paul is not intending to write a theological treatise but wants to cite Jesus Christ as the supreme model of humility and self abnegation. Since there was some kind of friction among some of the members of the Philippians Community, apparently rivalry in leadership which resulted in ill feeling, he wants them to follow Jesus Christ. He asks them to put aside all personal preferences in favour of the welfare of others. In this context he quotes an ancient hymn about Jesus Christ which presents his loftiness and lowliness in one stroke. Paul gives depth to its meaning by adding the words, “even death on a cross” (Phil 2: 8).

¹³ *Charter*, no.4.4.1; Cf. The final statements of the All India Level Major Seminary Rectors’ Meeting held in Cochin 2005 and New Delhi 2006, and that of the Asian Level Rectors’ Meeting held in Hua Hin, Thailand 2006, do stress the features and qualities required of the formators in the Church documents.

A. Jesus was in The Form of God

From the very beginning Christians believe that Jesus Christ is God (Jn 1: 1; Rom 9: 5; 1 Cor 1: 24; cf. 1 Cor 8: 6). This faith is articulated in a deeper way in the Nicene Creed: "He is God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father, through whom all things were made, those in heaven and those on earth." It is also believed that Jesus is the centre of all things. "He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (Jn 1: 2-3). Paul asserts, "For in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him" (Col 1: 15-18). By saying "He was in the form of God" (Phil 2: 6) the loftiness and the pre-existent state of Christ is asserted.

B. Jesus Emptied Himself

Jesus makes a decision to empty himself from the state of loftiness. He who is the center of all things is always in motion towards the periphery. What he possessed, i.e., likeness to God, he did not consider as something to exploit for selfish gains. Instead he saw the likeness to God as involving self-emptying for the good of others. This self-emptying is to be understood as going to the opposite extreme. The opposite extreme for one in the condition of God was to take on the condition of a slave.

The general theme and the specific language of the Philippian hymn corresponds to the "servant song" of Deutero-Isiah (cf. Is 52: 13 - 53: 12). It must be noted that in Greek two words are used to refer to 'servant'. The first is *doulos*, which means 'servant' or 'slave' or 'bond slave'. The second is *pais*, which means 'child' or 'servant'. In the Septuagint translation of Deutero-Isiah though *doulos* and *pais* are made use of, it is *pais* that is very much used. In the Philippian hymn it is *doulos* that is made use of to refer to Jesus as servant though early Christians preferred *pais* to refer to him (Acts 3: 13, 26;

4: 27,30). It points to the fact that Jesus stooped himself to the level of a slave. It involved a movement from being "Lord of everything" to being "Lord of nothing." From the divine point of view, unredeemed human life is an existence of slavery (cf. Gal 4: 1-10) and therefore the "divine-slave" polarity is significant.

It should be noted that the *kenosis* motif is not confined to any one or two, or more, passages, but is the underlying theme of the New Testament. The incarnation itself is the first movement of the *kenotic* process of Jesus, because by entering this world Christ did not wish to be treated in his humanity like a divine being but like a servant. Both St. John and St. Paul point to this one reality of "self-emptying" in two different perspectives. For John, it is "putting on" and for Paul, it is "taking off." For John, God becomes one of us by "putting on human flesh" (cf. Jn 1: 14), whereas for Paul, it is by "emptying himself of divine glory" (cf. Phil 2: 7). John's concept is what theologians call the "Incarnation," from the Latin *caro, carnis*, meaning "flesh." Paul's concept instead is known as "*Kenosis*," from the Greek *kenosis*, meaning "empty." This concept is beautifully described in the Philippian hymn.

C. Jesus Moved to the Ultimate periphery

We usually look at 'incarnation' as one moment in the life of Jesus, and 'redemption' as another separate moment. But in the mind of Paul, "*kenosis*" is a single sweeping movement in time which embraces both moments. The self-emptying of Jesus begins with "taking on the form of a slave and being born in the likeness of men," and reaches its climax in the lowering of his self to the point of obedience "unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2: 8). The point seems to be that, even though involved in the slave situation of human existence, Christ could have lived a more or less normal human life not involving further subjection. Instead in line with his embodiment of the divine generosity, he chose to be subject in the most extreme sense. That is in his movement to the periphery he cannot move any further. He is marked down. This is the point of ultimate periphery. No one can crucify him because he is already crucified. No one can mutilate him

because he is already mutilated. On the Cross he cried, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27: 46). Jesus lived as a periphery man. It was at the periphery that he established his identity and centre. His identity was his Cross, his exaltation was his humiliation. He was the Lord because he was the crucified one. His centre was the periphery and he became central because he gave up the centre.

D. Jesus Revealed God's Solidarity with the Suffering Humanity

God's love is revealed most fully through *kenosis* which attains the peak on the Cross. It captures the paradox in life that those moments in which God seems most absent can be recognized as moments in which God is most present. The dark presence and activity of God in the death of Christ puts an end once and for all to the suggestion that God is indifferent to the pain and suffering of humanity. If the Cross can offer access to God, then it means learning to see power in powerlessness, speech in silence, and life in death. In other words, on the Cross one can discover God, not through wonder but through suffering, and in God's loving solidarity with those who suffer. Thus it becomes clear that humanity's question about the meaning of suffering and death is answered by God in the suffering and death of Jesus.

E. Jesus was Validated

The *kenotic* act of Jesus on the Cross may appear to be the ultimate absurdity. But when we perceive it considering the resurrection, what appeared to be an absence and abandonment on the part of God, becomes God's own presence and validation. Resurrection is the manifestation and confirmation of what happened on the Cross and in the life of Jesus. This, however, does not mean that resurrection removes or diminishes the cruelty of the Cross. There is a real continuity between Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Resurrection marks the Father's simultaneous and irrevocable acceptance of Jesus' life and death. Resurrection confirms their validity in the face of rejection. Though the Philippian hymn does not use the word 'resurrection' it refers to it by saying "God has highly exalted him" (Phil 2: 9). This exaltation

process continues further by bestowing on him “the name which is above every name” (Phil 2: 9) and thereby every tongue is made to confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2: 11).

Conclusion

Self emptying, moving to the ultimate periphery, having solidarity with the suffering and thereby getting vindicated are the salient features of the ‘kenotic model’. In many ways the *kenotic* hymn can be paralleled to the Gospel episode of Jesus’ washing his disciples’ feet (Jn 13: 3-17). Jesus takes off his outer garment and assumes the menial work of a slave, stooping down to bathe the feet of his followers. At the end of this act, he exhorts them, “You also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13: 14-15). Concretely, this is what Paul means when he tells the Philippians “Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). Therefore, formators should learn to wash one another’s feet, i.e., anticipate one another’s needs through humble service and consider others as better than themselves. The kenotic hymn gives testimony to Jesus’ teaching about true greatness: “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mk 10: 43).

Imbibing the spirit of kenotic model the formators, then, must learn to empty themselves from their *ego*, their selfish motives, their pride, their non-cooperative attitude and behaviour, their anger, their partiality, prejudices, etc. They should fill themselves with the love, spirit and attitude of the Lord Jesus. They must have genuine concern and love for the formees. As Jesus had solidarity with the suffering the formators have to have solidarity with the formees. It means that they should make effort to understand every one of the candidates, his longings and desires, his motives and hopes, his family background, his strengths and weaknesses and guide him as the Holy Spirit induces and inspires. Thus they can move to the ultimate periphery as Jesus did and become ‘positive’ role models.

The Indian context demands that our priests and nuns always move to the ultimate periphery in their ministry and life if they want to carry on the mission of Jesus Christ. The vast majority of the Indian population is living on the territory of periphery. Therefore, it is a call and demand that the formators themselves move to the periphery and guide and help the formees to learn the art of moving to the periphery. To achieve this end both of them must start self emptying and allow God to work in them. There is a paradox in letting God to act in one's life: "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be. When I let go of what I have, I receive what I need. These are feminine or Yin paradoxes: By yielding, I endure. The empty space is filled. When I give of myself, I become more. When I feel most destroyed, I am about to grow. When I desire nothing, a great deal comes to me."¹⁴ If the formators live in this way they can be good role models.

¹⁴ Taken from "Tao Ten Ching," China's best loved books of wisdom